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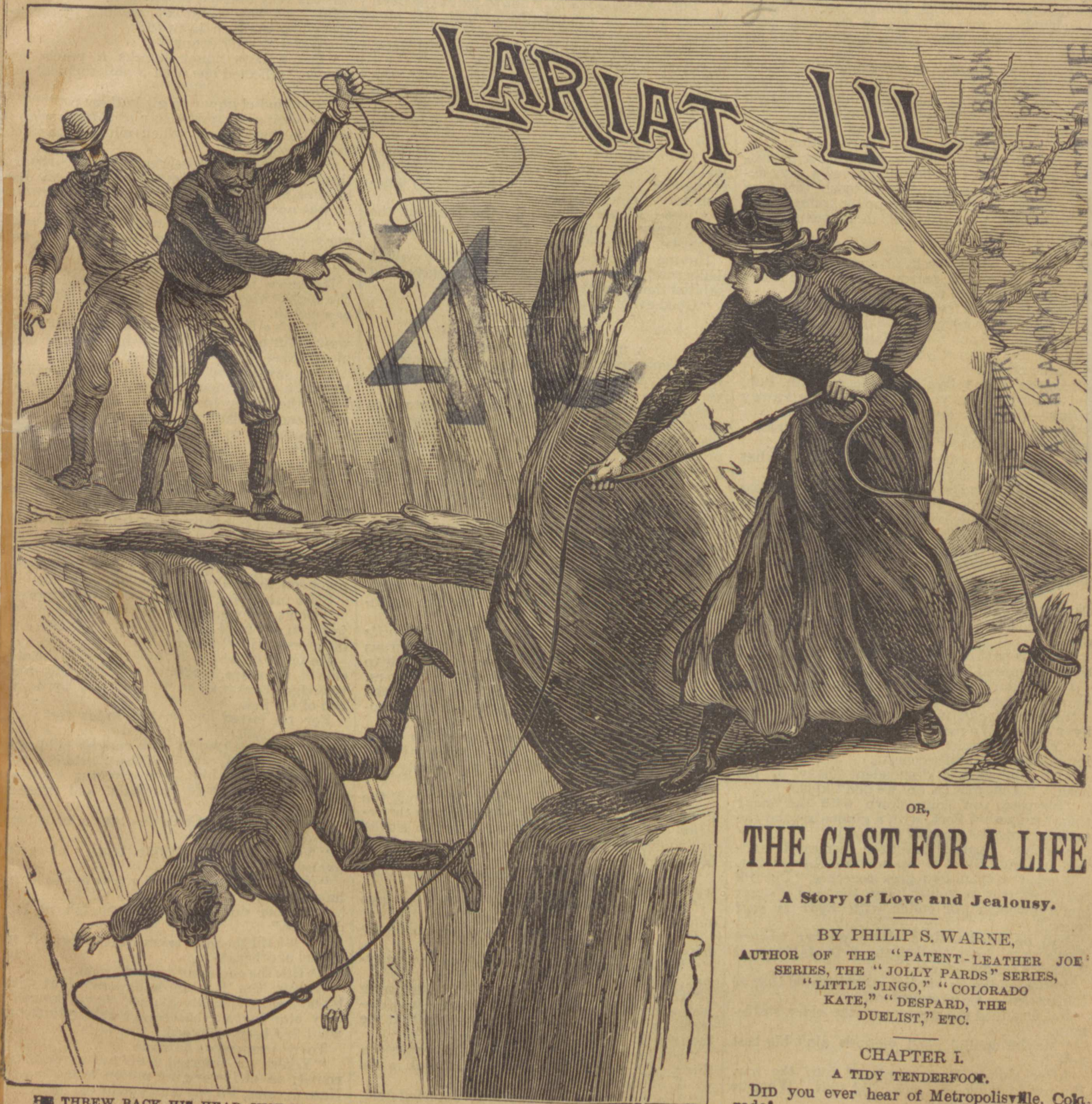
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OR,

THE CAST FOR A LIFE

A Story of Love and Jealousy.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF THE "PATENT-LEATHER JOE" SERIES, THE "JOLLY PARDS" SERIES,
"LITTLE JINGO," "COLORADO KATE," "DESPARD, THE DUELIST," ETC.

CHAPTER I

A TIDY TENDERFOOT.

DID you ever hear of Metropolisville, Colorado?

No? Well, you needn't stop to find it on the map, for I can tell you all you will care to know

HE THREW BACK HIS HEAD JUST FAR ENOUGH TO SEE THE COMING NOOSE, AND TO REALIZE THAT HE WAS PLUNGING HEADFOREMOST DOWN THROUGH IT.

about it in less time than it would take to look it up.

It is not the metropolis of the State, as its founders flattered themselves it would be, nor yet of a county; but it stands without a rival in its township, and that's something.

To be frank, it is as wretched a mud-wallow as you would wish your worst enemy to be buried in, consisting of a tavern—with a bar, of course—a blacksmith shop, a wheelwright and carpenter shop combined, a general store in which you can buy anything from a string of onions to— But just what it is they keep in a little stone jug under the counter in the back part of the store, I'll never tell you!

Nor, on reflection, will it pay to enumerate all the branches of business represented in a border town of five-score inhabitants, more or less.

Suffice it to say that it is the resort of all the cowboy element in that section, and when they are there in force, they "make Rome howl!"

Into Metropolisville, then, toward the close of a fine October day, rode a youth who was destined to give the whole crowd points, and to walk away with them at that.

He was dressed in a light slouch hat, not different from those in common use, a Norfolk jacket, quite unique in those parts, stout breeches— But there! all breeches are pretty much alike. His boots, though, were remarkable, being of fine calf-skin in the feet, with legs of morocco that came half-way up his thighs.

At his back was slung a repeating-rifle. About his waist was girt a row of cartridges, in a belt that supported also a brace of highly finished revolvers and a formidable-looking bowie.

But clothes don't make the man, and certainly they were the least part of Bert Brainard.

It did not matter that he was rather boyish-looking, in spite of his having proved a very active Mugwump the fall before; boyish, that is to say, compared with the strapping young Thors of the border who could no more than count years with him.

You had but to look into his clear-cut face, with its high white forehead and fearless eyes, to see that he was a person likely to be heard from when occasion required.

When he swung from the saddle and gave his horse into the keeping of a stable-boy, the fellow leading the animal away, glanced back at him askance, and then winked at a comrade, to receive the retort:

"Et you ever take a hand along o' him, Bob, you swing the best you've got, er he'll git away with ye—you hyar me."

"A tidy tenderfoot!" sneered the groom, vexed at being thus "sat down upon."

"It ain't the outside, but the inside, what counts," was the sage rejoinder.

When Bert ate his supper, he took a spotless linen handkerchief from his hip-pocket, and spread it across his lap in lieu of a napkin.

At sight of it, the landlord, who filled the office of waiter, stopped dead short and stared, with a cup of steaming coffee in one hand and a plate of bacon and potatoes in the other.

"Waal, I swar!" he ejaculated. "What in Cain do ye cali that thing, stranger?"

Bert looked up with a smile of quiet amusement.

"In this part of the country," he replied, "I believe you call it a *wiper*, for short."

The landlord uttered an explosive monosyllable which doesn't look well in print, and added:

"We don't *call* nothin' o' that kind in these hyar parts. We pass out."

"You don't order it up?" asked Bert, following out the landlord's conceit.

"No, no," with a despondent shake of the head. "That gits us, an' we don't kick."

"Suppose you come down with the sugar then," suggested Bert, with a glance around the table in hopeless quest of the bowl.

"Sugar? Sugar!" cried the dismayed landlord, rolling his eyes up toward the ceiling.

"Waal, yes, them two goes together. But I'll tell ye what it is, young feller, the kind o' sugar you'll sweeten yer coffee with hyar is *saft* sugar."

And he shied a tin molasses-pitcher toward Bert's plate, down the length of the table, as if it were a shuffle-board.

So the landlord's verdict corroborated that of the hostler—a tidy tenderfoot.

But he added the wisdom of the older stable-man.

"Maybe spilin' good victuals ain't his best holt."

After supper Bert sauntered into the bar. But not to drink—he never did that. What he asked for was a cigar.

"A—a—what?" demanded the barkeeper, with a stare of affected bewilderment.

"A cigar," repeated Bert. "Did you never hear of such a thing before?"

"Oh, yes, a cigar!" echoed Johnny, of the shirt-sleeves and diamond pin.

Under his breath he reiterated, softly, meditatively:

"A cigar!"

Then looking across the bar with his head on one side:

"Is thar ary brand what you'd leaver have than another?"

"On reflection," answered Bert, gravely, "I think I'll content myself with whatever you happen to have."

"Because," supplemented Johnny, "we've jest imported a fresh lot."

And stooping, he brought up from under the counter a box containing an assortment of clay pipes—all of the same sort!

This he flanked with a stone jar of tobacco, and looked at his customer to note the effect of this "filling of the bill."

With imperturbable good-nature, Bert accepted the situation.

Later, in confidential conference with his employer, Johnny found that they were all in agreement as to the character of the new guest—a tidy tenderfoot.

"But," added Johnny, "not to paint the devil blacker'n he is by natur—he took his pipe straight!"

Meanwhile Bert had gone to the general store, to replenish his stock of cartridges.

Though the autumn days were genial, the nights in that high locality were beginning to be a trifle sharp, and he found the usual knot of old standbys gathered around the stove at the back of the store.

As he entered, it was evident that his fame had gone before him, or that his appearance was enough of itself to interrupt the ordinary sluggish flow of conversation.

A dead silence reigned in the back of the store, every one smoking or chewing, as the case might be, in somber meditation.

Having completed his purchase, Bert walked deliberately back to the solemn conclave, and saluted them quietly.

"Good-evening, gentlemen."

CHAPTER II.

A BAD MAN TO WAKE UP.

It is said that at a certain temperature water which is perfectly still may be suddenly converted into ice by the slightest jar.

Quite the reverse of this, human nature is such that, when it is frozen with the prejudice that makes every stranger an alien, a single word, properly spoken, will thaw it out to friendly good-will.

In reply to Bert's salute, two or three of the company bobbed their heads and muttered:

"Evenin'!"

One pushed the jar of complimentary tobacco toward the new-comer.

Another knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and extending it, said:

"Ef you kin make any use o' my pipe, pardner, I'll take a leetle some 'hm fur the tooth-ache."

Now, smoking another man's pipe isn't quite like borrowing his tooth-brush. The generous donor, in this case, was considerate enough to wipe the stem by drawing it through his fingers.

Bert was not so nice on this point as to check the outflow of cordiality by declining the accommodation.

We may remark, in passing, that his benefactor drew the remedy to which he had alluded from a bladder pouch, and that it generally goes by the name of "fine-cut."

"From the States, I reckon," ventured the storekeeper, who, standing somewhat in the relation of host, felt that it was his part to set the ball rolling, the rest smoking on as gravely as Indian braves.

"Yes," admitted Bert. "This is a great country you have here."

"Waal, we 'low as it's about as fine as lays outdoors."

This matter of first importance thus modestly disposed of, another took the word.

"What mought you be doin' out hyar anyway, ef it's a fair question?"

"Only looking about a bit," replied Bert, with just enough reserve to show that he was discreet, without giving the impression that he thought the "feeler" at all "fresh."

"Not fur work, I'll bet a hoss!" interposed a third, with a grin and a glance that took in the whole of Bert's person.

"You know how it is yourself!" retorted Bert,

quickly, yet with a smile which showed that, while he understood this allusion to his general get-up, he did not resent it.

"Ef you've got any money, stranger," came from another quarter, "this hyar's jest the place to drop it."

"At poker?" asked Bert, slyly.

"Nary poke," was the response. "I 'lowed as ye mought be speckillatin'."

"That depends," said Bert, with the non-committal air of one who wasn't jumping at everything that came along, but knew enough to pick up a good thing that lay in his way.

"Thar's ole man Falkner," ventured the storekeeper, throwing out this suggestion as if for the approval of the company.

"Falkner?" repeated Bert, turning quickly.

"Know him?" asked the storekeeper.

"I believe I have a letter of introduction to him, along with some others."

One of the smokers withdrew his pipe long enough to say:

"White man. Treat ye squar'."

Another spit into the ash-box, and added his mite:

"I hyar as how the ole man's 'lowin' to make a raise on some o' them cattle o' his'n. Take him at his own figgers, stranger. Ye can't go wrong."

"You're safe to buy of the ole man blind," was the very unusual testimonial.

But this was somewhat qualified by the proviso which another threw in:

"When he ain't drunk!"

"Queer how liquor knocks a man's conscience," reflected one with a philosophical turn of mind.

"The kind o' liquor ye git in these parts!"

This with a suggestive leer at the guardian of the little stone jug, to which allusion has been made.

But before the storekeeper could parry this thrust, the joker—the same who had lent Bert his pipe, and had ventured an opinion as to what he was *not* looking for—broke in:

"I say, pard!—ef you ain't lookin' fur work, nor speckillatin', we've got jest what *will* take yer eye, an' no mistake."

"Eh?" answered Bert, cautiously.

He knew that something was coming, from the slight twitching of the corners of the speaker's mouth.

"Thar's a fine young girl hyar, what's been waitin' fur a tidy tenderfoot like you to come along this—"

Thus far he got, rolling his eyes quizzically toward a companion who had not yet spoken, when the latter burst forth, with a frown of annoyance so black as to prove that he was an ugly customer to fool with:

"You dry up, Nate Crosier! We've got enough out o' you!"

Among such men nothing is so much enjoyed as a personal "hit," especially if it "goes home" and ruffles its victim.

The whole company burst into an uproarious guffaw, which did not tend to soothe the irritation of the touchy young "cow-puncher," who sat scowling straight before him, at a kit of mackerel, flushed to the temples.

Still, fun-loving Nate kept on, banteringly:

"Don't you waste no time on the ole man, but jest you ask fur Lariat Lil, an' give your letter of inter— Haw! haw! haw!"

He broke off abruptly, and ran off to the other side of the stove, laughing, and standing ready to dodge about it if he was pursued by the victim of his jest.

For the latter had leaped to his feet with a menacing oath.

But the man nearest him caught hold of the skirt of his coat, and the others held out their hands to prevent him from catching his adversary, while the whole lot roared and protested by turns.

"Hold on, Jim! Can't you take a leetle brush like that thar?"

"Yes! yes! The Rankin blood's altogether too heady."

"Nate's a blame fool, but you've got to let him have his say."

"Simmer down, pard! Thar ain't no harm done yit."

"Wait till the gent takes Nate's advice!" suggested another slyly.

At this the company roared again.

As for Jim Rankin, he favored Bert with a by-no-means friendly glance, which seemed to defy him to "try his hand" at anything like what had been proposed.

To his tormentors he said:

"You're an infernal set o' mutton-heads, all round; an' ef I ever git a notion to lay fur that Nate Crosier, I'll pay him up fur old an' new!"

At this moment a great "whoop and hurrah-boys" arose in the street, accompanied by the thud and splash of flying hoofs in the mud, as a company of horsemen drew up before the door, dismounted, entered, and demanded the little stone jug boisterously.

It was a very small jug, considering the draught upon it; but any apprehensions as to its failing were allayed when one saw it replenished at the spigot of a pretty sizable cask which stood in one corner.

This interruption changed the current of interest, and as Jim Rankin was greatly in demand among the new-comers, Bert Brainard had a chance to look him over at his leisure.

He saw a young borderman of about his own age, but much larger in build—indeed, he stood not less than six feet, and was broad in proportion.

He had jet-black hair and intense black eyes, while his complexion was so swarthy as to suggest Indian blood, though this was negated by his features.

To do him justice, he was rather good-looking, with a wild sort of comeliness. But he had the rough manner of a man whose great strength and endurance makes him almost insensible of pain; and it was plain that his untamed will had received scarcely more restraint or training than that of any savage of them all.

A glance showed that he was a ruling spirit among his fellows. Everything was referred to him, and he decided it autocratically, no one presuming to appeal from his off-hand decision.

It is of such stuff that the heroes of a semi-barbarous people are made, but they are firebrands in a more highly civilized society, and not infrequently fetch up on the gallows, or at least in prison.

The theme of an animated discussion was a *rodeo*, or round-up, which was to take place on the morrow, and Bert heard old man Falkner's name frequently mentioned, though no one alluded to Lariat Lil.

As he listened to the talk about cattle and their owners, and the feats of strength and skill of rival cowboys who would probably take part in the sports that attend these assemblages, Bert amused himself by trying to fancy what sort of a damsel it could be in whom Jim Rankin had a proprietary interest.

Lariat Lil!

The name seemed a sufficient warrant that she was "horsey," which includes a little more than mere fondness for the noblest animal that man has tamed to his use.

Bert knew a very enthusiastic young lady in his Eastern home whom he had heard declare that she "could just live in the saddle!" but he smiled at the thought of such a name as Lariat Lil being applied to her.

He ran over his experience of mountain belles, strong of frame and round and rosy with health, whose flashing eyes make you forget that freckles and honest sunburn are horrid bugbears, to be kept at bay by veils, or masked with cosmetics—not the kind of young women that one sees in fashion-plates, but just the kind for pioneers' wives, who can at a pinch defend their children with a rifle, or maybe an ax, from bloodthirsty savages.

However, Bert had the Eastern prejudice against a loud, free laugh, and perhaps an impertinence requited by a box on the ear; and he made a wry face at the thought of a father who was currently referred to as "old man" so-and-so, and who was reputed to be a sharper when he was drunk.

Take it all in all, he thought that he should give Jim Rankin little cause for jealousy, even if he was so fortunate as to win the favor of the border coquette.

But when he left that store, Nate Crosier followed him out and said:

"Look a-hyar, pardner!—I don't mind sayin' as I like your all-around style."

"Well," replied Bert, trying to repress a smile of amusement at this childlike frankness, yet extending his hand, not at all ill-pleased, "I think I can honestly return the compliment."

"What? No! You don't say!" cried Nate, his face broadening with a grin of delight. "Waal, now, that ain't bad! Putt'er thar fur ninety days!"

And he struck his hand into Bert's palm with a crack like a pistol-shot.

His grip, too, was like the hug of a grizzly bear; but Bert was well put together, if he did have a gentlemanly smallness and whiteness of hand in marked contrast with Nate's bronzed and callous paw; and instead of wincing, he returned the pressure with a grasp that heightened Nate's respect for him.

"Waal, I sw'ar!" he cried, "you pan out better'n you promise, an' that's more'n kin be said of most. What does this hyar mean with you in the East? Is it to say pards?"

"We don't have many pards in the East," replied Bert. "But there's where I think the West can give us points; so, if you're agreeable, it is to say pards."

"Fur three years or the war?" asked Nate, alluding to the terms on which men were enlisted in "the late unpleasantness."

"For the war!" responded Bert.

"Good enough!" cried Nate, shaking the hand he held with a heartiness only known to the West.

"And now," he went on, "ef you want some sport to-morrow, the round-up'll be right to yer hand."

"All right. The round-up be it."

"But, say, pard," supplemented Nate, with a return to his joke of the early evening, "ef you do ketch on to Lariat Lil, look out for Jim Rankin. That's a friend's advice!"

"Who is this Lariat Lil, as you call her?"

"What! you hain't hyeared o' Lariat Lil yit?"

"No. How should I?"

"An' you've been in this hyar section— Let me see! Low long is it?"

"Only so long as it has taken me to come directly here."

"An' you've got clean to Metropolisville, an' never hyeared o' Lariat Lil!"

"Certainly."

"Waal, I reckon you hain't talked none to speak of on the way. But then, maybe you ain't favored that way."

"If everybody I met was as hard to draw out as you seem to be, it isn't remarkable that I have been left in my ignorance," laughed Bert, his curiosity piqued more than he would have admitted it possible.

"Oh, I'm easy!" was Nate's assurance. "Jest you give me room to swing my jaw, an' I'll tell you all about it."

"Leave me standing-room, and you can take all the rest of the country for your accommodation. Now drive ahead."

"Waal, to begin with, Lariat Lil is—"

But here Nate broke off abruptly, scratched his head in a moment's reflection, and looked up with a twinkle lurking in the corner of his eye.

"Well," said Bert, "is that all we're to hear about it?"

"On second thought," was the reply, "suppose we cheese the racket till you see her at the round-up? She's bound to be thar. An' ef you take her measure with yer own gauge, you can't say as I've lied to ye about her. But, hyear me, pard!—Jim Rankin's a holy terror! Don't you wake him up ef you kin help it!"

CHAPTER III.

THE PARDS.

If his curiosity had been satisfied, it is likely that Bert Brainard would have forgotten all about the border belle ten minutes afterward; but the touch of mystery which grew out of Nate Crosier's fondness for teasing was just enough to provoke speculation, so that he couldn't get her out of his mind.

He went to sleep thinking of her, to wake up suddenly in the middle of the night, with just the tail-end of a woman's bantering laugh lingering in his ears—the remnant of a dream, all the rest of which escaped recollection.

Once awake, his thoughts ran riot in the wildest fantasy. The girl haunted him. Her face and figure almost started from the darkness—almost, but not quite, as if she were a tricky sprite animated by the same perversity that possessed Nate Crosier.

For hours Bert turned and twisted in his uncomfortable bunk, until he was fain to shower left-handed blessings on his new pard, who had set him this employment so exasperatingly ridiculous.

It was not until the gray dawn of morning that, utterly worn out, he sunk into an unrefreshing stupor.

But even then he was not free.

He dreamed that he was riding at a terrific pace, amid a thousand pitfalls of rock and crevasse, fleeing some unknown peril that threw him into an icy sweat of fear. He heard the hurdling of a lasso in the air above him, and though he bent to his horse's neck, the fatal noose settled down about him.

Just as he expected the nip that would pluck him from his saddle and hurl him headlong upon the rock that strewed his path, a girl's merry laugh rung in his ears, and he opened his eyes,

which he had involuntarily shut in the dread of imminent death, and turned his head, to see a border amazon riding at his side, her teasing face, with its sparkling eyes, its dimpled cheeks, its red lips and milk-white teeth, within a few inches of his own.

He reached out and caught her in his arms, determined to make her pay for her trick with a half-dozen kisses at least, when she underwent a sudden and most startling transformation.

He was locked in a deadly embrace with Jim Rankin, whose crowd of cowboys were thundering up, as they had carried the store by assault the night before, filling the air with yells of savage hostility.

In a mighty effort to trip his adversary, Bert started upright in his bunk, to find that he had already kicked off the blanket—whence the icy sweat of his dream—while the door of his room shook and rattled under the vigorous thumping of an iron fist without, and Nate Crosier's voice filled the house with racket enough to represent Jim Rankin's crowd the best day it ever saw.

"Wide awake! wide awake in thar!" it bel-lowed. "Rouse, ye sluggards, an' greet the light o' the sun! Whoop! Hello! Hi thar, pardner! air ye dead? What in Cain is a man sleepin' fur this time in the mornin'? Turn out, I say! Turn out, or I'll fetch the house down about your ears!"

Through his open window—for our young tenderfoot believed in plenty of ventilation—Bert saw the sun just peeping over the serrated horizon of mountain peaks. He hadn't had twenty minutes' sleep!

Resolved to pay his new pard in his own coin, Bert quickly reached under his pillow, and before Nate had well completed his "leettle eye opener," as he called it, the sleeper he had come to rouse was blazing away, through the window, at the sky, putting six shots into about as short a space of time as they often occupy, even on the border.

The pounding at the door broke off abruptly; the invocation to greet the rising sun ended in a yell of dismay; and Nate was heard to leap back from what began to have the sound of a dangerous neighborhood, trip over something in his haste, and fall sprawling.

Then followed a moment of dead silence, in which Bert rightly surmised that his pard was examining the door on which he had so recently been beating a devil's tattoo, surprised at not finding it splintered with the bullets he had feared were the return for his practical joke.

Bert waited long enough to hear the low ejaculation with which Nate owned that he had been "come up to."

"Waal, I sw'ar!"

Then he leaped lightly out of bed, opened the door, and said:

"Come in here, you lunatic, and stop that infernal racket! What are you doing on the floor there? Get in here—quick! before any one comes."

There were sounds of hurried footsteps approaching from another part of the house. Bert's shots had given others the same impression that Nate had received. In the West, pistol-shots generally "mean business!"

Nate scrambled to his feet with a grin of enjoyment, and, as he dodged into the room, laughed:

"I bolt my reg'lar allowance, pard—cob an' all!"

But, once within the room, and the door shut, he turned and stared at Bert with open mouth.

The tenderfoot was arrayed in a muslin night-shirt, long enough to reach half-way below his knees.

He did not seem to notice Nate's surprise at sight of this unaccustomed, and in his eyes perhaps rather effeminate luxury, but bustled about, tossing his clothes and a pair of saddlebags from the one chair to the bunk, with the invitation:

"Sit down, and see if you can't hold your breath for as long as it takes me to get inside of my clothes!"

Then, while Nate slowly and abstractedly turned the chair round, so that he could sit astride of it, resting his elbows on the back, Bert dove into his saddlebags, and employed himself so busily drawing from that receptacle sundry toilet articles, that made the observer stare more than ever, that Nate was left to answer a voice that came from the other side of the door.

"Hallo! What's all this hyar row about?"

"Row?" repeated Nate. "Who's makin' a row but you? Inquire next door."

"You be blowed!" growled the landlord, not ill-naturedly, however, for Nate Crosier was a privileged character, and everybody accepted

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him as one of the unavoidable plagues of life. "Some more o' your confounded nonsense, I reckon."

Others were heard muttering as they took themselves off at the landlord's heels, the evils which some of them called down on Nate's head being oddly out of keeping with the cheerfulness with which they really took what they supposed was only one of his "sells."

"Ef you ever give me away in this hyar thing, pard," said Nate, grinning at the misconception in which he had left the outsiders, "I'll— But, thar! it wa'n't bad fur you to snake me in hyar so's the boys wouldn't drop."

There are little things that signify a great deal, and Nate's tone showed that he was not without appreciation of the forbearance Bert had displayed, in being willing that, having "got squar," with his pard, it should be kept between them. If the others had been permitted to get hold of it, they would have "rigged" Nate with the less mercy since, first or last, they all "owed him one."

"You're the right sort, an' tnat's a fact," he added, heartily.

Bert answered only with a smile, as he tossed a sponge into a bucket of water which stood waiting.

Then drawing his night-shirt over his head, he stood "stripped to the buff," like a young Greek god, in perfect symmetry of bone and muscle, and with flesh as hard and white as marble.

In less time than it takes to tell it he had flashed the wet sponge several times over his whole body, and was rubbing down with a coarse towel, until a rich pink glow diffused itself all over his skin.

Then into his clothes, with the celerity of a "lightning-change artist," until he stood before his astonished pard as full of sparkling vivacity as if he had drank of the elixir of the gods.

"Waal," said Nate, after he had drawn a long breath, "do you keep that up every day, summer an' winter—you chaps in the States?"

"In the States or out of them," replied Bert. "I don't believe any one who had tried it for a spell would ever think of doing any other way."

A clean shave, and a rapid though tasty dressing of the hair with comb and brush followed, Nate reflecting on the "topknot rake," with more spaces than teeth, which hung beside the rain-water barrel, flanked by a tin basin on a stump, at which he had not threaded his frowzy shock of tow, and Bert stood forth, a tidy tenderfoot from top to toe.

Nate gazed curiously at the *multum-in-parvo* saddle-bags, from which Bert seemed to draw whatever he happened to fancy, remarking:

"I reckon, now, you couldn't pull a hull suit o' new clo's out o' thar, ef ye took a notion, could ye, claw-hammer coat, plug hat, an' sich."

"We'll wait and see if I have any need of such an outfit," laughed Bert, as he hustled the things back into place. "You may depend, though, that I don't carry a hotel restaurant about with me, or I wouldn't spoil a first-class appetite with the murphies and grunter that our landlord sets out. But, come on; maybe we're lucky to get that."

And throwing the saddle-bags over his shoulder, he led the way out.

Down with a breakfast that would have given a wolf dyspepsia, then into the saddle and away like the wind, his eyes flashing over the scene with such keen watchfulness that not one of nature's beauties escaped him, his tongue running on in a stream of admiring comment.

Nate Crosier gazed at his companion in open-mouthed wonder. He had never seen any one so full of bounding life. He was not slow-witted himself, but Bert Brainard kept him breathless with the quick play of his fancy.

So they reached a broad plain, on which, in every direction, where trees did not intervene, men could be seen riding at full tilt, with a constant accompaniment of hallooing and profanity, driving squads of excited cattle toward a common center.

Nate raised himself in his stirrups and gazed under his hand toward a spot where a company sat or their horses in waiting.

"Yes, thar they be," he cried. "Now, pard, a last word. Ef you take it into your head to go foolin' round Lariat Lil, keep yer weather eye peeled fur Jim Rankin!"

CHAPTER IV.

OLD MAN FALKNER.

A SWINGING gallop across the intervening space brought Bert and his pard to where a

group of cattle-men were watching and discussing with keen interest a great herd of cattle that was constantly being increased by the arrival of others, the whole kept in a compact mass by herders riding about on the outskirts of the throng.

Here and there flashes of bright color showed that the group was diversified by members of the gentler sex, and as soon as he got near enough to discriminate faces, Bert ran his eye eagerly among the latter, in quest of some one who would answer to his idea of Lariat Lil.

But Nate, who had purposely dropped far enough behind to watch Bert's face, laughingly bantered him.

"No go, pardner! She ain't on hand—least-ways, not in sight; an' you needn't cock yer eye fur none o' the rest of 'em. Thar ain't but one that's worth lookin' at when Lil's away, an' yer humble sarvant's pre-empted that one, an' don't ye furgit it!"

"I see her!" cried Bert, his glance stopping at a bright face with laughing eyes and lightening color. "She's a beauty—just my style!—and I mean to cut you out. See if I don't!"

"You do, an' I'll put a hole through you, or my name ain't Nate Crosier!" laughed the lover. "You trot out that thar letter of introduction, an' put in your time with the ole man. Thar he is, an'—waal, it's airly in the day yit!"

Bert laughed at the implication of this last sentence, but with no little interest he sought to select old man Falkner from among the men, who, discovering a stranger, were all looking at him as he approached, for the moment discontinuing their conversation.

"Gents!" shouted Nate, at the top of his voice, "hyar's a sheriff from back in the States, whar you all come from. Hello, Bobby Pillsbury! You needn't be sneakin' into the middle o' the herd. He ain't after you this time. Nobody hain't got no call to feel oneasy but ole man Falkner. We're after him, an' we're bound to fetch him—"

"Confound your impudence!" cried Bert, in dismay, reaching out and seizing Nate by the sleeve.

But despairing of making anything of him, he turned and addressed the group of cattle-men, as he drew rein before them.

"Gentlemen, I hope you will not hold me responsible for this rattle-headed fellow. I assure you that his original style of introduction is as unexpected to me as it must be surprising to you."

A general laugh followed, and Bert felt that it was at the embarrassment he displayed. But one of the men said:

"You'd have a mighty big contract ef you undertook to tame that Texas steer. We know Nate Crosier of old."

"Have I the honor to address Mr. Falkner?" asked Bert, surmising that the man whom Nate had particularized would be most likely to speak to him.

But he was out of his reckoning, not having allowed for the freedom of the West.

"Me? Oh, no!" was the denial, with an easy laugh and a wave of the hand in the direction of another, who was at the same instant saying:

"That's my name, sir! Your humble servant, sir!"

Bert turned, to see a man bowing, hat in hand, with most pronounced ceremony.

A glance showed that he was a Southern gentleman—of the old school, as the saying is. His dress, distinguished from that of the rough-and-ready Westerners who surrounded him, was such as he had worn in the hunting-field at a Virginia fox-chase.

From this affectation of dress and from his manner, Bert got the impression that here was an old beau gone to seed. The inroads that liquor had made in his dignity were patent at a glance; yet, in spite of all, he was not a man to be contemptuously passed by.

"A friend of my father, Mr. Horace Catherwood, has had the kindness to commend me to your notice," said Bert, drawing an envelope from his pocket, and presenting it with a bow.

"Catherwood? Catherwood?" cried old man Falkner, with evidently pleased recollection. "Well, sir, you come well recommended—you do indeed! I am heartily glad to see you, sir! It is with the greatest satisfaction of my life, sir, that I am able to extend to you the hospitalities of my home, as long as you are pleased to honor me with your company."

And old man Falkner grasped Bert's hand, and shook it with a cordiality that brought a flush of pleasure to the young man's face.

"But," he went on, before Bert could collect

himself sufficiently to say a word, "I must make you acquainted with our people. And we have some men hyer who are well worth knowing, I do assure you, sir. I—I beg your pardon!"

His manner indicated that it was Bert's name that was in request, and Bert hastened to supply it.

"My name is Brainard—Herbert Brainard—"

"Eh! What's that, sir? Brainard? What Brainard?" burst in old man Falkner.

"Of Springfield, Ma—"

"Not Selwyn Brainard?" again interrupted old man Falkner, breathlessly.

"That was my father's name. Did you know him?"

"Know him! Know Sel' Brainard? Well, sir, I should say that I did! We were brothers, sir!—brothers! We were freshmen together, and made it lively for the crowd that undertook to haze us. We have stood shoulder to shoulder in more rushes and cane-fights than you ever heard of, in these degenerate days! We've been in many a scrape, sir, and well out of it too, that we're not likely to tell our sons about!"

And old man Falkner laughed heartily at some recollection of his college life.

"But what is the meaning of this, sir—Sel' Brainard's boy coming to me on the indorsement of somebody else? You don't mean to tell me, sir, that your father has forgotten me? Hang Holly Catherwood! He has no right to step between me and Sel' Brainard! No, sir! no, sir!"

And old man Falkner grew red with generous indignation.

"My father," said Bert, lowering his voice, "is dead!"

"No! no! I won't have it so!" shouted old man Falkner, striking his thigh with his fist.

Then he reached out a pair of trembling hands, and seized Bert by the hand and shoulder.

"Don't tell me that, my boy!" he pleaded, brokenly.

"He has been dead for three years," said Bert. "I can't tell you how grateful I am for your sympathy."

Old man Falkner's hands fell away slowly, while his eyes remained fixed on Bert's face, with an expression of deep trouble.

Then he reverently lifted his hat, saying, brokenly:

"He was a gentleman, every inch of him, and the stanchest friend a man ever had! May God be good to him!"

There was something so impressive in this simple tribute, that every hat in that company came off, and there was a period of profound silence.

It was broken by a great clattering of hoofs, and yells and bursts of laughter.

With a sigh of relief every one turned from the momentary sadness to the more grateful merriment of a straggling company of young people who came tearing down toward them.

CHAPTER V.

A LITTLE "TOO PREVIOUS."

NEVER did a party of young braves, raiding a neighboring tribe, chase the brides they had come to steal, with greater ardor than did these lusty cowboys spur after the laughing girls who were *apparently*—exerting every effort to elude them, to enhance the value of the forfeit to be paid on capture.

There was a flying of hoofs, a whisking of tails, a fluttering of draperies, and a scattering of dust, in every direction, and screaming, and fighting that would have put the Kilkenny cats to shame, but it all ended in the same way—with tumbled hair and red cheeks, and a sound box on the ear at the finish.

However, in advance of all the rest, one girl bent to her horse's neck, urging him forward with voice and whip, with an energy which looked more as if she really meant it.

Her cheeks were bloodless, and her eyes flashed fire, either with excitement or anger.

Gazing at her, Bert thought that he had never seen a face at once so beautiful and yet so spirited.

Her cheeks were bronzed with exposure, and there was a freckle or two on her nose, perhaps; but when she got near enough Bert saw that, with the care that women ordinarily give to such things, her complexion would be very clear and fair.

A soft felt hat of vivid scarlet, and a variegated scarf about the waist, gave to her dress a picturesque effect which none of the other girls succeeded in producing.

She was mounted on a horse whose blood-red nostrils, rolling eyes, and perfect action com-

pleted a picture that set Bert's veins to tingling with keen admiration.

Hard behind her thundered Jim Rankin, plying the spur with a mercilessness which showed that he was resolved not to be balked in his purpose if quivering flesh and straining thews could accomplish it.

There was a smile on his face, but an iron one, with more of determination in it than of merriment.

He caught sight of Bert Brainard, and the smile died out, leaving the iron unalloyed. His swarthy cheeks paled, and his eyes glowed with a fierce defiance, while his nostrils dilated ominously.

Now adding voice to spur, he bent forward, and urged his horse to even more tremendous efforts, until he gained upon the fugitive at every bound.

Nate Crosier had penetrated the group to the side of the blushing Miss Belinda Bowers, to fill her with uncomfortable happiness by his teasing; but his interest in the conceit which had led him to pit the tidy tenderfoot against Jim Rankin for the favor of Lariat Lil got the better of Miss Belinda's fascination, and, while all were watching the approaching chase, and some were shouting encouragement to pursuer or pursued, he presented himself at Bert's side, and said:

"Thar she comes, pard! How's that fur peart an' purty? And, see!—she's got her eye on ye already!"

This was true. From all the group, Lariat Lil's eye had selected out the stranger.

At sight of him, she started abruptly erect in her saddle, and suspended her efforts at goading her horse. Then a wave of crimson swept from chin to temples, and the whole expression of her face changed, from a sort of hopeless desperation to haughty, fearless indignation.

Meanwhile Jim Rankin had gained upon her, so that he was almost at her side when she turned so as to look at him over her shoulder.

"Don't you dare to touch me, Jim Rankin!" she cried, in clear, ringing tones.

"We'll see about that, my beauty!" he replied, the expression of his face showing that, whatever came of it, nothing now—not even the presence of her father—would stop him.

It was no time for words. Young-lady indignation would be thrown away upon him. She saw that nothing but some unusually vigorous effort on her part would save her from being kissed right there in the presence of— She thought of only one person—the young stranger who was looking at her as if moved to interfere in her behalf, yet restrained by a doubt as to her relations with her persecutor.

While every one else was laughing as if it were a huge joke, the blood had rushed to Bert Brainard's face. He was not used to such rough freedom, and it was to him no joke to have actual violence done to the feelings of so pretty a girl.

But if Jim was her lover—and the fact that her father did not interfere seemed to show that there was some justification of his pretensions—Bert did not wish to make himself ridiculous, and perhaps offensive, as much to the girl herself as to others, by playing Don Quixote.

With a woman's quick perceptions, Lariat Lil read his thoughts aright, and was filled with burning indignation.

"They have been telling him too!" she cried to herself. "Even before they have a chance to see me, every one is warned that I belong to that brute! Oh, how I hate him!"

Then, setting her teeth, she went on:

"Well, he, for one, shall see how much truth there is in that story!"

And plucking from her saddle-bow the coil of a rawhide lariat, she swung it round and round her head, and tried to strike her pursuer in the face with it.

Jim ducked his head, and at the same time reached out to seize her about the waist.

But with a cry of rage, the girl reined her horse a little out of line, and at the same time drew him upon his haunches; and as her lariat came round again, after passing over Rankin's head, she cast it toward the ground in front of the animal he bestrode.

Jim Rankin's arm missed the waist of his prize, but the tips of his iron fingers closed upon her scarf, to twist it about and almost drag her from the saddle before his hold broke.

The next instant his horse went down, throwing a complete somerset, and hurling his rider just far enough over his head not to fall upon him.

Lariat Lil had noosed his fore foot.

It was a desperate act. Her only thought had been to free herself from an unwarranted humil-

iation. At that moment, with the eyes of the young stranger upon her, it had seemed as if the peace of her whole life was at stake. She did not realize the possible consequences until the catastrophe was precipitated before her eyes.

Now she slipped to the ground, and clinging to her father, who, with one plunge of the spurs, had forced his horse toward her, and leaped from the saddle, to encircle her with his arm, she gazed at her fallen wooer, too hysterical with blended indignation and dismay to realize what she was saying.

"I hope I haven't killed him; but I sha'n't regret it much if I have! The girls ought not to have started that silliness; but that didn't give him any right to—to—"

She broke off at the word that made her ears tingle.

But Jim Rankin was not dead, by a great deal. Covered with dirt where he had plowed the ground, he rose and shook himself like a Newfoundland dog.

He looked about, at first in some bewilderment, but with growing comprehension as his glance went from Lariat Lil to Bert Brainard, who had urged his horse forward, and also leaped to the ground near her.

Then with a forced grin he said:

"It's all right. Thar ain't no harm done. But I reckon you've spoilt a boss that's worth a little somethin'."

However, the horse had scrambled to its feet, and though it was somewhat shaken up, did not seem much the worse for its ground and lofty tumbling.

Everybody gathered about with embarrassed gravity; but the awkwardness of the situation was relieved by the unfailing courtesy of old man Falkner.

"Mr. Rankin," he said, in his grandest style, just a little inflated by sundry "eye-openers" he had already taken that morning, "my daughter and I regret the fall we have caused you. We hope that you will not find yourself to have sustained any serious injury, sir."

The formality of this address "floored" Jim Rankin. He hung his head, and looked sheepish.

"Don't mention it!" was all he could stammer.

But the humiliation of having any one "hold over him" was sure to prompt Jim Rankin to "git squar" at some one's else expense; so turning from the old man without meeting his eye, he made a sweeping back-hand pass at some of his crowd, who had pressed too close about him, eager to see the upshot of the matter, and growled:

"You galoots cl'ar out o' hyar! What in Cain air' ye gawpin' about? Jim Rankin ain't knocked out yit, an' don't ye furgit it!"

As the menaced crowd reined their horses sharply aside, so as to create quite a stampede, he proceeded to mount again.

Old man Falkner turned, and seeing Bert close beside him, said:

"My dear, this is Mr. Herbert Brainard, the son of one of my oldest and dearest friends. My daughter, Lillian, sir."

Lariat Lil turned and met Bert's glance. Then both blushed and dropped their eyes, as they bowed, Lariat Lil hurriedly, Bert profoundly.

"I am happy to know you, sir!" she said, her voice hoarse and constrained.

"Madam, you do me too much honor!" stammered Bert, ready to kick himself the instant after for being betrayed into so absurd a speech.

"Plumb center!" muttered Nate Crosier, who was watching this ceremony with delight.

But he turned and saw Jim Rankin looking at the couple across his saddle, as he hesitated with his foot in the stirrup.

Rankin was not frowning, but he stared fixedly, through round, wide-open eyes—an expression that was far more ominous.

"We'll have to look out fur that gentleman," said Nate to himself.

CHAPTER VI.

A CLEAR FIELD.

BETWEEN the two oceans there was not a man of truer metal than the tidy young tenderfoot in whose fortunes we have sought to interest the reader.

It was not his disposition to go out of his way to pick a quarrel with any one; but the man was not living who was big enough or fierce enough to make him swerve one step out of the course to which he felt that his duty as a man called him.

If it had appeared that Jim Rankin was

Lariat Lil's lover, acceptable to her, Bert would have treated her with perfect courtesy, but nothing more.

But it looked to him like a case of bullying persecution, in which no one had the pluck to interfere; and at the thought of leaving a girl like Lariat Lil to the tender mercies of such a ruffian as Jim Rankin, all the chivalry of his nature rose up in arms.

Instantly he stepped to Lil's side and asked, with all the ease of his Eastern training:

"Miss Falkner, will you allow me to assist you to remount?"

"Thank you!" she answered, so agitated that her voice, in spite of her, did not rise above a whisper.

Then her foot was in his palm, and she rose into the saddle as light as a bird.

Across the two horses Jim Rankin's eyes shot a glance into hers that made the crimson ebb from her cheeks again.

Then he swung into the saddle and galloped away like the wind.

With perfect outward self-possession, Bert mounted, placed himself beside his young hostess—for they were on her father's property—and fell to chatting with her with an ease and sprightliness in marked contrast with the first attempts at gallantry of the sturdy cowboys with whom she was familiar.

But she—she who was generally the gayest of the gay—was now strangely quiet.

She answered Bert, of course, put briefly, constrainedly, almost absent-mindedly. Her color came and went fitfully, and her eyes kept wandering off to where Jim Rankin was giving angry orders to some herders who seemed to have done something that afforded him an excuse for venting his spleen upon them.

This shook Bert's confidence in his position more than anything else could have done.

"I wonder," was his pleasant reflection, "if I have blundered in this matter, and am to hold myself responsible for a lovers' quarrel after all? I may have an unpleasant meeting with this ugly brute, and receive no thanks from Miss Lillian for my interference."

Bert Brainard was so straightforward that nothing irked him like being in a false position, and he determined to get himself out of this quandary without delay.

He was casting about for the means of securing greater freedom of speech with Lariat Lil, when Nate Crosier's good angel, the bouncing Miss Belinda, inspired him with an idea of which Bert got the benefit.

Of all the wise sayings known to Miss Belinda, there was none she so heartily indorsed as that which affirms that "two's company."

It is not surprising, then, that she should invite Nate to a race to a chaparral-crowned knoll a mile or so distant.

Now Nate was nothing loth to have Miss Belinda to himself. Indeed, the idea gave him so much pleasure that his generous good-nature prompted him to open a similar avenue of enjoyment for his partner, so he hailed Bert at once:

"I say, pard, how'd you like to go over to yan chaparral? You kin git a view from thar what you can't git from hyar, an' I reckon this thing is all new to you."

Miss Belinda's round face lengthened perceptibly, but Bert jumped at the chance.

"If it would be agreeable to you, Miss Falkner," he said, turning toward Lil.

The color swept into the girl's face, and for an instant she hesitated, letting her eye again roam toward Jim Rankin. But suddenly she drew herself more erect, her eyes flashed, and her delicate nostrils dilated.

"If you wish it," she answered.

And they moved forward.

They had scarcely separated from the crowd, when Nate looked back, and said, with a wink:

"We'll see how bad you want our company. You'll have to stir your stumps fur it, if you do!"

"It begins to look as if you regretted your invitation," laughed Bert, in return. "But you sha'n't be rid of us for any great length of time, if the knoll stays where it is, and you don't keep on going."

"Waal, don't hurry yerselves," was Nate's parting word, as he dug his spurs into his horse's flanks.

Well pleased at this turn of affairs, Miss Belinda bloomed again, and lashed her horse to a furious gallop.

Away they went, neck or naught, leaving Bert and Lariat Lil to follow more leisurely.

After remarking casually upon several things that caught his eye, Bert observed, quietly:

"Your friend, Mr. Rankin, seems to be a man of authority."

The girl started and colored at the introduction of her persecutor into the conversation, then recovered herself sufficiently to say:

"Those cattle, many of them, belong to him."

"He is rich, then?"

"Yes, I suppose so. He owns more cattle than any one about here, except Major Griswold. His father left him a fair start, and he has increased his stock. They say he has had good luck, but I suppose it's good management as much as anything."

"That is the secret of his influence, then? But he struck me as a man who would be likely to carry his point even without that advantage."

"He makes them all afraid of him," said Lariat Lil, with a burst of emotion.

Bert hesitated before committing himself beyond recall to what might be taken as an impertinence, and then gathering himself to meet whatever he brought about his ears, he asked, in a different tone of voice:

"Miss Falkner, will you permit me a—personal question?"

She flashed her eyes around to his with a startled look.

"For my—my future guidance!" he stammered.

"Certainly," she answered simply, looking away again.

"Has Mr. Rankin any—that is to say, must I consider his wishes in any little attentions that I may—"

Again she flashed round, now panting, and with tears of vexation in her eyes.

"They have been saying something to you?" she cried, passionately.

"Nothing directly," protested Bert.

"Well, it is lies— Oh, I beg your pardon!"

The denunciation came out like a thunderbolt, and her humiliation was as sudden and profound as if she herself had been the victim of the lightnings of her own scorn.

But before Bert could say anything, she recovered herself, and went on like the wind:

"I hate him! He is the pest of my life! I wish he was out of this neighborhood, or I was!"

"Well," began Bert, with a sudden brightening.

But interrupting him, she swept on:

"He has had the impudence to appropriate me, as if it were a thing that he and the rest of them could settle among themselves without my having a word to say in the matter. He has frightened all of them away by his brutality, until they are almost afraid to show me the common decencies of life."

"Not that I care for any of them," she added, with a fine toss of her head. "They are a set of ungainly calves, all round! Nate Crosier is the only decent one among them!"

Now this was a little harsh. Even in her little world there were men who, lacking the graces of a dancing-master or an Eastern dude, perhaps, were yet as fine specimens of manhood "as ever stood in shoe-leather," and Lariat Lil knew it.

But she was already laughing a little hysterically, and with no effort to wipe away the tears that overran her eyelids, which showed that she was not quite sincere in her strictures.

"Suppose, then," suggested Bert, quite cheerfully, "that we say no more about Mr. Rankin and his—"

But she was not quite done yet. Here was the chance to put herself right in the matter that had troubled her most, and she availed herself of it to the full, being once in.

"What you saw to-day was through no fault of mine—"

"I can well believe that."

"Whatever you may have been led by appearances to suppose"—and now her cheeks were as red as damask roses, yet she kept on with a desperation beautiful to see—"I do not approve of—of—the freedom that is allowed here. I don't know whether it is so or not in other places—where you live, or anywhere—"

She was getting "all broke up" in her effort to make herself understood without saying what she meant in too plain terms, but she quickly rallied, and went on to the finish in fine style:

"But whether it is or is not, I have my own ideas about such things, and no man living can say that I have ever permitted him any"—her voice wavered a moment, and then went on—"any relaxation of the politeness that ought to be shown a lady. I had nothing whatever to do with the affair this morning, except trying to

escape. But even if I had, Jim Rankin is the last man on earth that I would allow to come within a thousand miles of me. He is a brute and a coward, or he never would have pursued me almost into my father's arms. And if I couldn't have prevented him any other way, I would have shot him. Yes, I would!"

She turned away with blazing eyes and bloodless lips, quivering from head to foot in her indignation.

She caught Bert gazing at her with such undisguised delight and admiration, that her eyes fell, and the color surged again into her face.

"I suppose I have said too much," she stammered, "but I have been forced into it."

"I wouldn't have had you say any less or differently for the world!" cried Bert, warmly.

"If I had known as much then as I know now, you shouldn't have lacked assistance this morning."

"I can usually take care of myself, thank you; and there has never before been occasion for such desperate measures."

"I think," said Bert, in quiet, even tones, that had more under them than appeared on the surface, "that it will not occur again. But what I wish especially to say is, that Mr. Rankin cannot frighten me away from you, and, if you will permit it, I will give him a much-needed lesson in modesty. When the others see that he is not particularly to be feared, I am sure that you will have more of them on your hands than you can comfortably take care of."

But quickly she turned to his smiling face the lilies of fear in place of the roses of maiden shyness.

"Oh!" she cried, breathlessly, "you must not do anything to provoke him to revenge!"

"I shall do nothing with a view to provoking him. I shall only act as I would if he were not in existence."

"But he will not stop to consider whether he has any right to interfere or not. You don't know him. He is the most desperate man in this whole region. Everybody is afraid of him. He does whatever he pleases, and his word is law. Scarcely a year ago he killed a man who crossed him in some trifling matter. Everybody said it was all right, because it had been done in fair fight; but his boast was, that people would have to learn, first or last, that he was boss, and that the man he shot might as well serve for the lesson as any one else."

"Oh! indeed"—and her voice became tremulous with solicitude—"you must not expose yourself—"

But here Bert's calm eyes brought her to a full stop.

"Aren't you paying me a poor compliment?" he asked, quietly. "I suppose, because I am a tidy tenderfoot—that is what Nate Crosier has dubbed me—you think Jim Rankin a much more terrible fellow than I am."

She looked at him steadily, and the undisturbed amusement in his eyes brought a faint smile to her lips.

"I don't know," she answered, "if you got very angry."

At that he laughed.

"You women stand in curious awe of a man's anger. But what is wanted in this case, I think, is some one to show that it is possible to be a little plucky without getting angry."

Into her eyes, as she looked at him, came a gleam of admiration more marked than she was aware.

But she looked away presently, and then rode on in silence.

At the first thought of Jim Rankin's anger, her heart had sunk with a sickening sense of anxiety for Bert's safety, but now she experienced a new feeling of security, and of glad pride. His cool self-possession, entirely free from bluster or bravado, inspired her with a profound faith in his ability to take care of himself. In the event of an encounter between them, it was Jim Rankin who, for once, would have to look out for himself!

So her spirits rose, until, by the time they reached the chaparral, all her wonted vivacity and sparkle had returned, and Bert had a chance to see the Lariat Lil who had fired the admiration of every young ranchero for miles and miles around.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHAMPIONS MEET.

FROM the knoll the view was all that Nate had promised—a broad extent of prairie, dotted with clumps of chaparral, over the rolling surface of which the *vaqueros* were assembling the cattle in one vast herd.

When they were all in, they were kept moving

about from left to right, while the *rancheros* who had come to select out their respective stock for the purpose of branding the calves that had been born since the spring rodeo, rode round them in the opposite direction.

Each as his turn came sent his *vaqueros* into the herd, to head off his cows and drive them out, followed by their calves.

This required no little skill, as the cows were often reluctant to leave their fellows, and Bert was interested to see the intelligence displayed by the horses, who soon discovered the cow sought, and headed her off with great dexterity.

As fast as they were whipped out of the main herd, the cattle were driven off to distances of a mile or so to be reherded, each *ranchero's* stock by itself, to be driven home to be branded, when they would be again turned loose till the next spring round-up.

During this exciting pursuit, feats of horsemanship and of skill with the *riata* were displayed by rival *vaqueros*.

One of the tricks which seemed to afford the cowboys a deal of amusement, was to ride at full chase in pursuit of a young steer, seize him by the tail, and throw him a complete somerset. Another was to lasso galloping cattle by one foot.

It was Jim Rankin's ambition to bear off the palm at every one of these feats. Riding like the wind, he stooped from the saddle and caught his hat up from the ground. Holding to the pommel of his saddle, he leaped to the ground, took a flying stride or two, and bounded again to his seat. He rode the worst bucking broncho in the lot, sticking to him as if he were glued on.

After each success—for, to do him justice, he was as active as a panther and utterly destitute of fear—he was loudly cheered by his crowd, and by the others as well. But he was too much of a bully to take his triumph modestly, even if he had not wanted to put Bert Brainard at a disadvantage in the eyes of Lariat Lil, by calling attention to the fact that these were manly exercises in which the tidy tenderfoot would have to play the part of a looker-on.

"Bah! he's a tenderfoot!" he shouted, when one of the *vaqueros* blundered. "Johnny, you'd better go back to the States, and turn counter-jumper!"

Another he hailed with:

"Let it out, Sam! You're a fair lady's-man, but when it comes to this hyar kind o' business, you'd better stand by an' look on."

But Bert took it all so cheerfully, showing no consciousness that he was being talked at, and cheering Jim when he deserved it with such entire freedom from jealous grudging, that Rankin could not forbear to address him directly.

"I reckon, stranger, you don't have none o' this hyar whar you come from?"

"No," admitted Bert, frankly. "There's where you're ahead of us. I never saw anything quite up to this."

"Waal, what do ye do?" asked Jim, scarcely disguising his contempt. "I reckon, now, you know how to do somethin' besides set around and chin the women-folks?"

Jim's crowd burst into a hoarse guffaw. They wished to emphasize their leader's rudeness so as to throw his rival into confusion.

But in this they reckoned without a knowledge of the man they had to deal with. Bert thought well enough of himself not to be over-sensitive to public sentiment.

With a quiet smile, he answered:

"We don't all do even that with equal grace. Indeed, good manners are rare enough, even in the East, to show that a little more of the society of ladies wouldn't be to our disadvantage. However, we don't put in all our time that way."

"And what else do you do, I'd like to know?"

"Well, we run, and jump, and wrestle, and box. Some of us shoot a little, though of course not with you fellows out here on the plains. Then once in a while you will run across one who has a knack at sword-play. That isn't so common, however."

"Run! You run!" said Rankin, measuring Bert with his eye.

"Oh, personally I make no pretensions," said Bert, not at all disturbed by Jim's manner. "I rather fancy rowing. And if I may say so, as shouldn't, the partiality of friends has made me stroke of our class four."

Jim Rankin was too keen-witted not to feel the satire of Bert's whimsical descent to his plane of boasting.

As quick as lightning he glanced at Lariat Lil, to see if she took it in, and was amused at his expense.

If she did, she did not smile, but looked displeased at the course he was pursuing.

With some accession of color, he replied, roughly.

"It's safe to blow about boatin', bein' as we hain't got no boat hyar. But, to come down to business, what start do ye want, to run me three hundred yards?"

"I never take odds," said Bert. "It's as easy to count up how much I am beaten at one end as at the other."

"You will run, then?"

"I will give you a chance to show what you can do."

"Maybe you've got some money you'd like to put up on yerself?"

"No. I never stake but one thing."

"An' what's that, I want to know?"

"My reputation. That isn't much; but it's enough to lose."

Once more Jim felt as if his adversary pricked him with a needle-point.

This cool indifference was most exasperating.

"He's so high an' mighty that he 'lows as these leetle things ain't o' no account!" said Jim to himself.

It was Bert's undervaluing the things on which he relied for pre-eminence that nettled him.

"Waal, I reckon that's so—it ain't much," he answered, bluntly. "Howsomever, I'll run ye fur what ye're worth, an' let it go at that. Shake that jacket o' yourn, an' come on!"

Leaping from the saddle, Jim tossed aside his hat, and drew his belt up a hole, settling himself in his clothes so that they would offer the least possible restraint to the action of his limbs.

Bert dismounted more leisurely, and only drew his hat down on his head, as if to prevent it from blowing off.

Nate Crosier was rendered uneasy by this carelessness. Forcing his way to his pard's side, he whispered anxiously:

"Don't throw off on him, pard. He's a holy terror, I tell you! He kin outrun ary galoot in these parts, an' he's done it, time an' time ag'in."

"Then it won't be much of a disgrace to be beat by him," answered Bert, cheerfully.

"But he'll skin ye alive!" protested Nate.

"Why not do the best ye kin?"

"Oh, I shall do my best," replied Bert, nothing disturbed. "I always do."

Nate groaned. What could be made of such a fellow as this?

Without seeming to, Bert cast a quick glance at Lariat Lil, and what he saw made his heart leap.

The girl was leaning forward in her saddle, pale with suppressed emotion.

"She does care something about it, then!" said Bert to himself. "Well, it would be a pity to disappoint her."

But he went to the trial with the air of a man who had made up his mind to defeat, but was willing to sacrifice his pride for the entertainment of the company.

"Air ye 'lowin' to run in that rig?" asked Jim, looking him over with marked disapproval.

"I suppose I might as well leave my revolvers behind," said Bert, coolly. "Will you oblige me, friend Nate?"

He was yet handicapped with a belt of cartridges and his bowie, not to speak of his Norfolk jacket and hat, while Jim had reduced his running weight to the least possible.

"I reckon," said Jim, his brows darkening and his nostrils dilating, "ef I clean you out, you'll lay it to your not havin' took the trouble to git ready."

"Oh, no!" replied Bert, as if it were the commonest thing in the world for one gentleman to demand of another an assurance of good faith. "I never cry small when I am beaten. It will be because you have outrun me, of course."

A lariat was laid along the ground, to serve for both the start and the finish, and they were to make in the interval the circuit of a sapling about a hundred and fifty yards distant.

Meanwhile Jim Rankin's crowd were crying all sorts of extravagant odds on their man. They went about shaking buckskin pouches under the noses of everybody who could by any possibility be supposed to favor the stranger.

Truth to tell, takers were scarce, though they offered ten to one, so that it seemed unnecessary for Bert to say:

"I hope no one will be so foolish as to stake any money on my success. I wouldn't put up a cent myself."

But old man Falkner wouldn't stand this.

"What?" he cried. "Shall my old classmate's boy run with never a soul that has pluck enough to back him with a stiver? Hyer, you fellows!

How many are there of ye? I'll go you ten apiece that we clean you out!"

Laughing uproariously, and cheering him for his grit, they flocked about the old man like jackals about the carcass of a buffalo bull, demanding what odds he wanted.

"Odds!" he roared. "Who says anything about odds? I go you even!"

Lariat Lil's eyes danced and her breath fluttered, in spite of herself. She could have hugged her loyal old father for doing what her heart prompted, though maiden modesty forbade.

Then Nate Crosier took the contagion.

"Whoop!" he yelled, suddenly leaping into the air and striking his heels together. "I go my pile on the tidy tenderfoot! Who's fur scoopin' me in?"

He was besieged as eagerly as he could have desired.

"Hold on, gents!" he said. "I ain't proud. What odds did I understand you to say?"

And though no one of Jim Rankin's crowd could cover his pile at that figure, he divided it into several stakes, and actually gave it around as a favor at ten to one.

In vain did Bert expostulate.

Old man Falkner only shook his fist at him, and laughingly warned him that if he caused him to lose his money, he'd cut him dead.

Nate assured him that he would rather lose his pile on his pard any time than double it on any one else.

And none of them knew that Bert himself had up a stake beside which theirs sunk into insignificance. He was staking his pile too. He would have felt it a sacrilege to put money up beside it.

Then the word was given, and away they sped.

Each side of them a crowd of cowboys scampered, spurring like mad to keep pace with them, while they burdened the air with their yells of encouragement.

One alone cheered the stranger. Nate kept inside the others on the side on which he rode, and yelled himself hoarse.

Pale and trembling, Lariat Lil sat her horse where she could look straight along the lasso which they must cross at the finish.

But, alas! her heart sunk. It looked as if she would have no need of so exact a view. Jim Rankin took the lead at the start and kept it.

She saw him swing round the sapling, followed—closely, but yet followed—by his competitor. Then they came down the home stretch like the wind.

Involuntarily, unconscious that she was betraying the depth of her interest in one of the racers, she pressed her hand upon her heart and waited with parted lips and bated breath.

CHAPTER VIII.

JIM RANKIN "FLOORED."

AND now came the finish.

Never was a wilder scene—twenty cowboys—half a score on either side—spurring like mad, leaning forward in the saddle as if by that means to gain even upon the wild speed of their flying horses, swinging hat or lariat about their heads, and yelling like so many frantic demons.

In their midst the two champions, straining every nerve, in dogged silence.

On Jim Rankin's face was a look of savage exultation. He had his eye fixed upon Lariat Lil.

"She'll see her pet cleaned out fur once!" was the thought that surged through his brain. "An' this hyar's only a beginnin'. I'll use him up for all he's worth, before I'm done with him!"

And it would have been a nice question to determine whether his jealous rage was directed more against the tidy tenderfoot or against Lariat Lil.

Just at that moment, if he had but known it, he was anything but a pleasant object to look upon.

But Bert Brainard was a sight to gladden the heart of one who regarded athletic training as the finest art to which human endeavor has been directed.

He ran with his head high, his lips close locked, his nostrils distended, and in his eyes the kindling fire of undaunted courage, and perhaps something else.

His shoulders well back, his clinched fists pressing his breast on either side, as it swelled with deep, regular inhalations, he ran without motion save from his hips down.

Though it broke Nate Crosier's generous heart to see him beaten, yet he was thrilled with delight at the spectacle his pard presented.

"The purtiest thing that ever took a woman's eye!" cried Nate to himself. "What odds ef he

can't keep step with that thar ornery straddle-bug? She'd orter take him because he looks so barnsome—an' she will too, or I lose my guess! Jim Rankin won't make nothin' out o' this hyar. Let his crowd yell."

All of which showed that Nate was not altogether unlearned in a woman's heart.

But what was this? Half the home stretch was passed, and— Could it be?

"Whoop!" yelled Nate, now gone mad. "Go it! go it! Good boy! Shake him up! Now go fur 'im! Knock the socks off of him! Hooray! hooray! Ha! ha! ha! Ya-a-a-a-a-ah!"

Corresponding howls of dismay and rage burst from the others, all of whom had been cheering their leader, and they pressed upon the contestants as if to run them down.

When Nate saw this he turned his attention from his favorite, and began to fight back the crowd on his side, and shake his fist at those on the other, with, it must be confessed, some pretty strong language to enforce his commands, while the rancheros who were grouped at either end of the lariat at the home "scratch" burst into cries of protesting disapproval.

And what was the cause of all this?

Half-way home the expression of Bert Brainard's face had changed. Into his eyes had come a look that would have sent a portentous thrill through Jim Rankin, if he could have seen it. Then suddenly he developed powers that astonished every one, and filled the exultant with dismay.

Jim Rankin did not fully realize the significance of the change in the tone of his crowd, their yells of triumph merging into howls of rage, until his competitor appeared at his side.

What! he had come up with him? was actually passing him?

Fifty yards yet remained. Fifty yards! What might not be done in fifty yards!

Rankin strained every nerve, but while it seemed as if he could add nothing to his speed, his rival appeared to have just begun to show what he could do.

Forty yards! Thirty! He was clearly ahead! It was plain that everybody saw it! Rankin's crowd were pressing in with the purpose of making a foul in some way.

But the rancheros at the home bourn now made so determined a stand, throwing up their hands, and shouting with such unmistakable indignation, that the cowboys were compelled to abandon the lost cause, and pull up their horses before they had fairly ridden the others down.

Then, with a smothered curse, Jim Rankin sought a coward's recourse.

Affecting to trip, he fell at full length.

Bert shot across the lariat with a final leap into the air, as if to show that he had scarcely taxed his powers.

Instead of slowing up gradually, he came to a full stop with that final jump, and turning, walked quietly toward his horse.

But Nate Crosier had gone mad with delight.

Without stopping to pull up his horse, he leaped from its back, and throwing his arms about his pard, fell to waltzing round and round with him, yelling and laughing, and capering like the happy lunatic he was.

Her ears ringing with the shouts of the rancheros who greeted the winner with the applause he had so gallantly won, Lariat Lil bowed her face in her hands, to hide the tears that sprang into her eyes.

But after one overpowering moment she recovered herself with a thrill of apprehension. The stranger must never know how she had thrown heart and soul into his cause.

Nate had already waltzed him up to the captain's office, as he expressed it, and was shouting to her father:

"Thar, gov'nor! look him over. Ain't he a neat one? An', oh my! ain't our money solid? Ha! ha! ha! He hain't got no run in him, but he gits thar all the same!"

Old man Falkner was shaking his hand warmly, with a smile of gratification mellowed by the spirit of John Barleycorn.

"Sir!" he exclaimed, with a hiccup to fill the rhetorical pause, for it was now somewhat later in the day than when Nate Crosier had gauged him by this test, "you are your father's son!"

This simple tribute touched Bert more deeply than a more wordy compliment could have done, and flushing with pleasure, he pressed the tipsy gentleman's hand with growing liking.

But even so, he glanced over old man Falkner's shoulder, at a face that spoke as eloquently, though the lips were dumb.

Meanwhile, Nate Crosier was enthusiastically "corralling" his bets.

"I hate to take yer money, gents," he protested, "but you're all old enough to have larnt the addage: 'Never send a boy to mill!'"

And he chuckled softly as he glanced at Jim Rankin.

The fallen champion had risen to his feet, and was elbowing his way through the crowd in quest of his rival.

"Hold on, boss! This thing ain't off yet!" he cried. "You've beat me all accordin' to Gunter, an' it ain't none o' your funeral ef I was a mind to take a tumble. So we won't say nothin' about that. But you 'lowed as you was some on the jump. Now I ain't much that way myself, but I'm minded to pick you up on it fur what thar is in it."

"Ef your bones is achin' fur that kind o' thing, Jim," interposed Nate, "what's the matter with the jump he's set you? Jest take a squint at this hyar. It's a full pattern, I tell you!"

"When I want anythin' out o' you, I'll let ye know!" responded Jim, angrily.

Then he added for the general enlightenment:

"I'm jumpin' from the scratch, I am."

With a faintly satirical smile, Bert said:

"I am sorry that you fell, but you'll excuse me for not offering to try it over. I might not come out so well a second time, and I am selfish enough to want to stop while my credit is good."

"But you've got to jump!" shouted Rankin, roughly. "You don't wipe up the ground with Jim Rankin, ye understand, without you kin wear him down to the shoulder-blades!"

"You have misunderstood me," protested Bert, mildly. "I only referred to the race. If you insist upon a jump, though I should not have thought of challenging you, I will do what I can to accommodate you."

"Call fur whatever ye think ye want, gents!" laughed Nate Crosier. "An' who's puttin' up ten to one on the bully boy now?"

Jim Rankin's crowd were mute. They had not had time to recover from their recent overthrow.

"Ef thar's ary gent what I hain't cleaned out in the last deal," teased Nate, "I'll go him even."

He looked about on the lowering faces, and went on:

"Waal, you chaps ain't as keen as ye was, an' that's a fact. To encourage ye, I'll go ye ten to one on the tidy tenderfoot!"

Then, for sheer shame, two or three who had money left bet him even.

"You kin set the pattern, ef you like, an' we'll have three jumps apiece," said Rankin, coolly ignoring the fact that he was the challenger.

But there was nothing modest about Nate Crosier, when his pard's interests were at stake. So he shouted:

"Hold on hyar! Who's—"

But, waving him to silence, Bert stepped up to the scratch.

He was about to make the jump, when Nate again interfered.

"You've forgot your weepens," he said, sarcastically holding them out. "An' what's the reason you don't take a saddle on yer shoulder, an' a burro on top o' that?"

"What's the matter, pard?" asked Bert, pausing.

"Wa'n't it enough to be handicapped with that belt o' cartridges runnin', that you 'low to take it along with ye on the jump?"

"I suppose I might as well take it off," assented Bert, as if the idea had not occurred to him.

Jim Rankin ground his teeth in silent rage. The tenderfoot was "rubbing it in."

Bert again toed the scratch, raised his fists, balanced a moment, then brought them down swiftly, and again forward, springing from position like an arrow from the bow.

An involuntary ejaculation burst from the spectators, Jim Rankin's crowd among the rest, as they measure the distance he had covered.

"That is the best I can do," he said, without looking at it. "I don't think it will pay for me to jump again."

And he coolly walked away, leaving his rival to make the best of it.

Jim Rankin changed color when he saw the task set him.

It did not tend to sweeten his temper to have Nate Crosier leap into the air, strike his heels together, and cry:

"An' that's good enough! Gents, we don't limit ye. Your whole crowd kin go inter trainin', an' then come hyar an' jump at that mark fur a month o' Sundays; an' when you give it up, you kin fetch 'round the stakes, an' we won't say no more about it!"

Setting his teeth hard, Jim gathered himself, and made the best jump that was in him.

It was not his fault that he fell full six inches short.

Of course he might have bettered his mark somewhat on a second or third trial, but he could not bring himself to take odds of his rival, even leaving out of consideration the chance of failure after he had humbled himself.

"That's enough o' that!" he growled, sullenly. "Now fur the wrastlin'. Maybe you kin git away with me thar too."

"Wrastlin'!" protested Nate. "He ain't half your size!"

"Ef he'll say he ain't half my size, I'll let him off at that," replied Jim, with a lurid gleam of the eye.

"I have never attached much importance to size," said Bert, coolly. "It is rather knack, isn't it, in wrestlin'?"

"You peel, an' show yer knack!" growled Rankin, roughly. "Ef I kin make you shake that jacket, it'll be somethin'."

"That will hardly pay," answered Bert, with exasperating indifference. "How do you wrestle?"

"You git whatever hold you kin," said Jim, gathering himself for the struggle.

Though he had been twice beaten with scarcely any apparent effort on the part of his rival, he believed that he was now to have his revenge.

"I'll make a hole in the ground with him!" he promised himself.

Lariat Lil turned deathly pale, watching the gleam in his eyes. She could scarcely refrain from interfering, to warn Bert.

Jim Rankin crouched like a panther about to spring, stepping about warily.

Bert walked about with none of this show of nervous alertness, so much so that he seemed to disdain the effort to put himself on guard.

Jim ground his teeth with rage. From first to last he had been treated with this cool contempt.

Bert suddenly made a lightning-like feint, tripped, and threw out his hand to catch himself.

With a howl of concentrated exultation and hatred, Jim sprang for him, determined to give him a fall that he would remember, when—

Just how it happened, nobody knew, but Bert recovered himself, there was a lightning-like trip, a writhing of his body, Jim's heels went into the air, and he lay on his back.

Bert, who had only sunk on one knee, rose, and walked off with the same indifference he had previously shown.

He had scarcely taken three or four steps when there was a sharp cry of warning from Nate.

But, either it was drowned by the applause his dexterity had elicited from all the impartial spectators, or it came too late.

Bert turned, only in time to see that it was Jim Rankin who seized him, having taken advantage of his back being presented, to leap to his feet and make a treacherous assault.

Snatching his rival off his feet with a strength born of mad rage, he whirled him into the air, and sent him crashing to the ground.

Piercing like a knife the general shout of dismay and condemnation, a woman's scream was heard. A horse bounded forward, and with a flutter of garments Lariat Lil reached the ground beside the victim of Jim Rankin's jealous rage.

"You coward!" she cried, looking up at Rankin, as she lifted Bert's head in her arms.

CHAPTER IX.

LARIAT LIL AT HOME.

RANKIN stood like a desperate fiend at bay. He had lost all, and in his mean revenge had thrown away what little was left him.

Nate Crosier had leaped toward him, determined to avenge his pard, but was caught and restrained by one of the rancheros.

Rankin's crowd gathered about him with a quickness that did credit to their training, at least.

"Come out o' this, Cap!" said one who was in the habit of taking charge of him when, as frequently happened, it seemed as if he was likely to do some desperate act which might call for Judge Lynch.

And he was hurried into the saddle and away from the spot.

But, though considerably shaken up, Bert Brainard did not entirely lose consciousness.

He did not know how Lariat Lil got to him, but he felt her arms about him, and he saw the expression of her face as she bent over him after reproving his assailant.

That and the ring in her voice recalled him to himself, and he looked straight into her eyes with a smile that brought the blood rioting to her cheeks.

Though maiden modesty was quick to take the alarm, a true woman's heart beat in Lariat Lil's bosom, and she did not desert her post.

"The coward!" she repeated. "He has hurt you."

"I am much obliged to him for it," replied Bert apparently not ill-pleased with the situation. "If he is satisfied with what he has done, I am sure that I am the last one to complain."

Though he did not put his meaning more plainly, Lil could not doubt the source of his content.

His eyes told the rest!

But Nate Crosier's indignation was not easily appeased. He was for "going for" Jim Rankin and his whole crowd, and giving them a general "cleaning out."

Taking his pard in his arms with more than a brother's solicitude, he lifted him to his feet, in spite of Bert's protest that he was not a baby to be dandled.

Old man Falkner made no noisy demonstration, but he manifested a gentleman's indignation at the treatment his guest had received.

He apologized to Bert, as if the whole community were in some sense responsible for Jim Rankin's barbarity.

The other rancheros added their condemnation, rather bluffly in most cases, but sincerely.

Bert assured them that the matter was of no consequence, and requested that no difference should be made in their manner toward Rankin.

When he sprang lightly into the saddle, to show that he was not hurt, the look of anxiety left Lariat Lil's eyes, and a gleam of pride took its place.

To divert attention from this unpleasant event, every one was anxious to plunge again into the sports that had been so rudely interrupted, and some one proposed that Lariat Lil display her skill with the instrument that had given her her sobriquet.

The painful embarrassment with which she sought to evade this demand attracted her father's attention, and he looked gravely from her to Bert Brainard.

After that he was quieter and more thoughtful than was his wont, and from time to time he glanced wistfully at his pretty child.

He even forgot for the longest time a certain flask with which he was ordinarily on the most intimate terms, and that with old man Falkner was a sign of great preoccupation.

So the day waned, and after nightfall the ranch and the chaparral, in the midst of which the house was built, were gay with the glint of lights and sound of music and laughter and flying feet in the dance.

Here more than one surprise awaited Bert Brainard.

He found bare floors, and walls that had never so much as made the acquaintance of a mason's trowel; but in what in that part of the country is called "the best room," he saw three fine old family portraits in oil, and evidences of education and refinement in the shape of books and magazines.

When Lariat Lil made her appearance after having changed her dress, he gazed at her in surprise and delight.

She presented a trim little figure in the simplest kind of a dress, with no ornament anywhere about her save a flower in her hair.

Bert was seated at her father's right hand, while she presided demurely at the further end of the long table around which gathered her guests.

The dinner was scarcely disposed of and the immense kitchen cleared, when the young people had a fiddle going and were enjoying themselves in as lively a dance as Bert ever saw.

What a cowboy can't do in the way of cutting an awkward pigeon-wing may as well be left unattempted!

But what was Bert's surprise to find that his hostess "waltzed like an angel!"

"Where in the world did you learn to dance?" he asked, his tones and the expression of his face saying even more than his words.

"My father taught me," she answered, crimsoning with pleasure. "I often dance with him when we have no music, but—"

Here she stopped dead short, in a panic of confusion.

"But what?" asked Bert.

"Oh, I shall never tell you!" she cried, looking as if she longed to run away.

"I know!" cried Bert, delightedly.

"No, you don't."

"But I do."

"Then keep it to yourself!"

"It's too good to keep. You know how to whistle!"

"Oh!"

Bert laughed, and said:

"If there is anything I particularly dote on, it's a girl—well, a certain kind of a girl that whistles."

"In spite of the crowing hen, and all the rest of it?"—for Bert's merriment was so contagious that she was now laughing with him.

"In spite of anything and everything," he maintained, stoutly.

She looked at him timidly, but said nothing further.

Now, Nate Crosier, with a matchmaking zeal quite out of keeping with his sex, and which he justified with the plea of "anything to beat Jim Rankin,"—Nate Crosier was "taking all this in."

"Whistlin'!" he cried, at this point. "Jest wait till ye hear her sing!"

"Oh, yes!" burst in bouncing Belinda, who, if cheeks and eyes are any indication, was having a famously good time. "Let's sing The Sweet By an' By!"

"Let up, Bullindy!" objected Nate. "We'll hark to your melodious bazoo in the sweet by an' by. But give Lil a show first. She sweeps the board when she plays a lone hand at that, an' you know it."

"If you're so fond of lone hands, you'd better play one yourself!"

And the offended Miss Belinda looked as if there was a likelihood of her refusing to "assist" in the game of life.

But at the word sing, everybody caught at the suggestion, and Lariat Lil was so besieged that Bert Brainard's expression of interest was almost drowned in the general clamor.

Bert was surprised to be interrupted in it by his pard, who presented a guitar which he had fetched from a corner with a readiness which showed that he felt very much at home.

"This hyar's the beauty," he said. "Now then, jest stand from under, an' let her went!"

Lil accepted the instrument shyly, and while the company subsided into a silence that might well find imitation further east, sung a simple ballad, but so sweetly that Bert was more than charmed.

"And where can you have learned this accomplishment?" he cried, surprised into a speech which he would probably have modified somewhat, if he had taken time to think how it sounded.

"I suppose," said Lil, with a faint touch of spirit, "you think we are a lot of savages out here, because we ride and—and—"

It was the lariat that troubled her, but she could not bring herself to made direct allusion to it.

"Pardon me!" cried Bert, in no little confusion. "Far from it. I have just found people who know how to make life worth living. But it seemed to me that the modulation of your voice could not be natural, and I wondered who you had to train it."

"My father," answered Lil, entirely appeased.

"What! That father of yours again? He is a regular fairy godmother!"

"He's better than that!"

Her eyes flashed proudly. Then, with a whimsical smile, she explained:

"I believe he was something of a ladies' man when he was young, and used to serenade."

But this suggested a new idea, and suddenly clapping her hands with the eager delight of a child, she cried:

"Oh, what do you think?"

"I hardly know what to think—next!"

"I have a box of water-colors on the way from 'Frisco!"

"And do you paint?"

"What a question to ask a lady!" interrupted Nate Crosier, with a sly wink.

"I shall be indebted to the same teacher for hints in coloring," answered Lil, "though he says it will be only hints this time."

"Not if I can help it! What's the reason you won't make me a happy man, when you can do it with a chance of some little profit to yourself?"

"You?"

"A poor enough teacher, no doubt. But if zeal—"

"Oh, let him alone fur zeal!" burst in Nate Crosier, with a significant chuckle.

"And do you paint?" asked Lil, trying to appear not to have noticed what Nate meant.

"I shall have to echo Nate, and say—What a question to ask a gentleman!" laughed Bert.

"I don't believe you do!" said Miss Lil, with a pout.

"Will you allow me to give you evidence to the contrary?" asked Bert.

She looked at him askance. Then to hide the

thrill of delighted anticipation that his proposal excited in her bosom, said, coquettishly:

"I'll think about it."

Whether or not Bert would have pressed for a more decided settlement of the matter, he was anticipated by Nate Crosier, who, looking past his pard and their hostess, addressed some one behind them.

"These two is already plottin' treason!" he declared, with his teasing chuckle. "Ef I was you, I'd look after 'em before it went too fur."

Both Lariat Lil and Bert turned, the former blushing scarlet at sight of her father, though the latter did not lose his wonted self-possession.

"Treason of the mildest sort," he said, with a smile. "Only a scheme to break a monopoly not in keeping with the spirit of our institutions."

Old man Falkner had entered while his daughter was singing, and taken his stand near enough to overhear the conversation that followed.

He now advanced to her side, and resting his hand caressingly on her shoulder and smiling tenderly in her face, said:

"When I came West, my little girl was so prostrated with grief at the loss of her sainted mother, that it threatened to seriously affect her health. I thought it wise to encourage a freedom of out-door life rather greater than is permitted to her sex in the East, and the return of the roses to her cheeks and the sparkle to her eyes satisfies me that I was right. At the same time I have sought that those things that give to her sex its peculiar charm should not be altogether lost to her. I wish I had been better fitted for my task."

Neither Bert nor Lil suspected that the old man had been meditating some such word of explanation as this ever since he had read in his daughter's embarrassment of the afternoon the fear that her life would seem unrefined to this gentleman from the East.

But he had said just what the girl wished might somehow be said to Bert, and now, shrugging her shoulder and canting her head so as to press her hot cheek against the hand that caressed her, she answered in a low tone:

"You are fitted for anything, dear papa!"

"Eminently for this, at any rate," began Bert, with kindling enthusiasm.

But before he could get further, the thud of flying hoofs abruptly pulled up before the door was followed by the intrusion of Jim Rankin at the head of his crowd.

A sudden hush fell upon the gayety of the company, and all greeted the new-comers with looks of surprise and anxious expectancy.

What was Rankin about to do?

CHAPTER X.

SETTING UP THE PINS.

It is needless to say that Jim Rankin rode away from his defeat in a frenzy of rage, and no one who knew him doubted that he would henceforth devote every thought and energy to getting "square" with the tidy young tenderfoot who had "got away with him" so completely.

For several miles he did nothing but spur his horse mercilessly, and vent the rage that consumed him in senseless profanity, his crowd following and blessing their lucky stars that they were not the objects of his fury.

But suddenly he sunk into sullen silence, and then they knew that he was becoming really dangerous.

"He's hatchin' up a new deal, with the devil fur the leetle joker," said Bob Pillsbury, to a companion. "Now, Mr. Tenderfoot, stand from under!"

Suddenly Rankin pulled up, and as his crowd gathered about him, looked them over keenly.

"Look a-hyar, Pillsbury," he said, presently. "You're the man I want. Step this way."

And he drew apart, followed by his faithful henchman.

"Air you my man?" he asked, eying the other as if to pierce him to the soul.

"I reckon I be," was the assent.

"Body an' breeches?" insisted Rankin.

"Hain't you always found me thar when you looked fur me?"

"Yes, I have."

"Waal, I hain't no call fur to go back on you now, as I knows on."

Rankin hesitated, and then spoke in a low, husky voice, scarcely above a whisper.

"Bob, you have stood by me in more'n one beastly scrape."

"So has the rest o' the fellers," said Pillsbury, generously.

"How many of 'em kin I count on now? Hold on! Wait till you know what I want. It ain't no boy's game this time."

"I know that."

"It's this hyar tenderfoot."

"Yes."

"He's done me bad."

"You bet."

"Curse him! I'm sot to git square."

"The boys don't need to be told that."

"Will they back me now?"

"I reckon."

"The hull figger, ye onderstand."

"O' course."

"To rub him out? Have ye got it in ye? Money ain't nowhar!"

The way Jim Rankin said that last, bending forward in his saddle until his murder-disfigured face was thrust fairly into that of his companion, was enough to make an ordinary man's blood run cold.

Bob Pillsbury proved that he was not an ordinary man, at least in this sense.

"What's it worth to you?" he asked, coolly.

"A cold two hundred fur you, an' a hundred apiece fur the rest," answered Rankin, promptly.

"Make it five hundred," said Pillsbury, without a flaw in his voice.

"I want you fur some fine work," cautioned Rankin.

"I knowed that," was the undisturbed reply.

"An' you'll put 'er through, an' not squeal ef you git ketched?"

"Tell me what it is, an' I'll tell you whether I will or not. Ef I undertake it, it's out o' your hands."

"Done!" cried Rankin, with fiendish satisfaction.

But when he developed his plan, even Bob Pillsbury, who was no chicken, changed color.

"That ain't no fool job," he observed.

"Would I pay you five hundred ef it was?" demanded Rankin.

"I reckon you wouldn't."

"Waal, maybe you hain't got the sand to put 'er through. All you've got to say is *No-go*, an' I 'low as Dave Jason'll jump at the—"

"No he won't!" interposed Pillsbury, with a scowl which showed that Rankin had played upon some jealousy that existed between the two.

"You'll go in, then, yourself?"

"Didn't I say I would?"

"Good enough! Now, is thar any shaky ones in our crowd fur this kind o' business?"

"Waal, thar's some as will keep their mouths shut, what hain't got the gall fur to go in."

Thereupon followed a careful canvassing of the comparative villainy of Jim Rankin's crowd.

The difference was one of "sand," or cowardice, rather than of moral scruple. Some few might not be reliable for a cold-blooded murder.

The choice spirits—those who would stop at nothing—were selected, and then Jim and his henchman rejoined the others.

Into Metropolisville they rode like the wind, where Jim Rankin went to the Express office, which served also as a bank, and came out again after a moment, buttoning his coat over a well-stuffed wallet.

Then away back to old man Falkner's ranch.

On their way they met or passed within sight of three or four herds of cattle being driven to their ranches, but Jim Rankin's lot yet waited near the scene of the round-up.

Making a new division of his men, so as to take with him only those selected for the diabolical work he had in contemplation, Rankin rode to Falkner's house, striding in among the guests with the swagger of one who was resolved to carry public opinion by sheer impudence.

"Hallo, hyar, good folks!" he cried. "Let us have a show at this hyar. Strike up, thar, Daddy Boggs! Give us somethin' with a swing to it!"

The fiddler smirked, and began to scrape away for dear life, while Jim seized upon the girl nearest at hand, and whirled her round the room at breakneck speed.

Such an encounter as he had had with Bert was not likely to affect his popularity among the marriageable damsels, most of whom would have been glad enough to get him, whatever his faults.

But old man Falkner started and flushed scarlet at this intrusion of a man who had so recently injured him through his guest.

It was Bert who restrained him with a hand on his arm, saying:

"My dear sir, if you wish to do me a kindness, you will not make me a cause of contention in a community where I hope to make my

home. Will you not ignore what has happened? Leave me to dispose of the matter in my own time and way."

"But, sir, am I to take that fellow by the hand again, without an apology, with—"

"You know that such men never offer apology for anything. But I do wish you to continue your accustomed relations with him, whatever they may have been."

"But, you don't know. They have been as near intimacy as—as—"

It was on the tip of old man Falkner's tongue to say, as near intimacy as was possible between a gentleman and such a ruffianly boor; but the thought of a business relation even then pending between him and Jim caused him to break off in some confusion.

Bert sought to put him at his ease.

"You know that public sentiment here is not over nice on the point which embarrasses you," he said. "Nothing would be looked upon as more Quixotic than for you to pick up my quarrel."

"But, gentlemen," protested old man Falkner, weakening:

"Do in Rome as the Romans do," laughed Bert.

"See, not one of your neighbors feels that Rankin has done anything to forfeit his standing. Besides, it is my wish. And who is called upon to make more of an offense than the injured party?"

"I prefer the old chivalrous instinct which makes a man more sensitive for his guest than even for himself," replied old man Falkner.

"However, if you insist—"

"Let us say no more about it."

But Lariat Lil was not included in this bargain, as Jim Rankin learned, when, later in the evening, he demanded her hand for a dance, with a rather labored affectation of his wonted off-hand assurance.

"Come, Lil, what shall it be, a waltz or a gallop?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Rankin," replied the girl, with an unpromising flush of the cheek and sparkle of the eye.

"Eh! what's that?" cried Rankin, with affected surprise.

"I shall have to decline the honor," persisted Lil.

"Oh, put that in yer nightcap. Come along. Daddy Boggs has got his elbow all greased up. Hallo, ole man! Give us the tune the ole cow died on! Rake'er down fine, now! That's the chalk! Hyar we go!"

And he sought to take hold of the girl in his old, free way.

But she shrunk away, and said, with frigid dignity:

"While you are a guest in my father's house I shall treat you with politeness, but after your performance of to-day you need expect nothing further from me."

"Nonsense! You ain't 'lowin' to bear malice fur a mite o' fun?"

"There was nothing funny in it for me."

"Oh, waal, let it go fur what it's worth. Let bygones be bygones—that's my motto!"

"It isn't mine! And if in the future you will bestow your attentions upon some one who will appreciate them more, it will spare me the painful necessity of repeating this refusal."

"What!" ejaculated Jim, lowering his voice to an ominous growl, while his eyes began to flash with slumberous fire. "Do you 'low as you won't dance with me?"

"That is exactly what I mean! I will never dance with you again, or even so much as speak to you voluntarily outside of my father's house."

"An' all because o' my performance, as you call it!"

Lil did not deign to notice this sneer, but turned away her head.

"I wonder," continued he, "whether it was my performance or the performance of somebody else."

And he turned a baleful glance on Bert Brainard, who, at that moment, was at Lil's side.

The changing color in Lariat Lil's cheek showed that this shot told, but she only compressed her lips the more tightly, and looked steadily across the room.

Bert stood with the air of a gentleman who is forced to endure a painful scene in which he is not yet justified in taking any part.

"Waal," pursued Rankin, after a pause, "ef you won't, you won't. Maybe, though, you'll think better of it another time."

And he walked off, quietly.

But those who saw him believed that this was a false appearance.

He made his way up to old man Falkner, and greeted him with:

"Hello, gov'nor! Hyar we air at last. I've been lookin' fur you. Now, how about them cattle? I've got the spondulicks in my pocket, an' we'll fix it up in no time."

"Step this way," said the ranchero, leading his guest into what was called the "best room," the dancing being in the kitchen.

Privacy was secured by closing the door, and then old man Falkner sat down before a table which had on it some account-books and papers nicely arranged.

Jim Rankin seated himself, and drawing a good-sized wallet from his pocket, proceeded with a business transaction which involved the transfer of the cattle on which Bert had been informed old man Falkner wished to realize.

With a presentiment of evil from the moment he knew that the tenderfoot had a letter of introduction to Lariat Lil's father, Jim had cut in ahead of him, and bought up the cattle the first thing in the morning, so that that excuse, at least, for his staying in the neighborhood would be removed.

"Thar you air—twenty-three hundred in hard rocks, an' my note fur the balance. What do ye want better'n that?" cried Jim, having counted out the money indicated.

"I hope that the bargain will prove to our mutual advantage," said old man Falkner, caressing the pile of money meditatively.

"Oh, it suits me well enough!" answered Jim. "I'll make a spec' off o' them thar critters before they're off my hands. But now I'll want your boys to help me along as fur as Ten-mile Creek. We'll start as soon as the moon shows up. I reckon they'll heve their fill o' dancin' by then."

"I've spoken to Bill," replied old man Falkner, "and he'll be ready as soon as you say."

"Good enough! I reckon I'll git the boys in shape to start. So, so-long!"

He left the room, and old man Falkner remained, patting the pile of money thoughtfully.

Now an iron set of the lips and a slumberous fire in the eyes showed that Jim Rankin was "ready for business."

Everything was progressing gayly. Satisfied that there was to be no outbreak that night, at least, the anxiety with which his return had been greeted was forgotten.

He found Bob Pillsbury, and whispered:

"Now's our time! The pias is all up. We're only waitin' fur to git you in position. Come on."

It was no difficult matter for them to make their way out of doors unobserved.

Once outside in the dense darkness, the moon having not yet risen, they paused under the wall of a lean-to.

"You're sure o' the room?" asked Pillsbury.

"Yes, I be," was Rankin's reply. "I know whar they put them as stays over night."

"But he'll have to sleep like a log, ef I'm to open the winder on him."

"He leaves his winder open."

"You know that?"

"You bet."

"Waal, it's your funeral. Ef you're out in yer reckonin', I ain't to put myself up fur a target, ye understand."

"You needn't. You do what you're paid fur doin', an' I don't ask fur no more."

"All right! Give me a boost."

Rankin put his foot on a bench that stood against the wall, and said:

"Drive ahead."

Pillsbury stood upon the bench, on Rankin's knee, on his shoulder, and from there lifted himself noiselessly upon the roof.

"Now pass that bludgeon," he whispered.

It was handed up to him.

He passed his hand over it in the darkness. Its knobbed end seemed to give him satisfaction.

"Thar ain't no argufyin' with the like o' that!" he muttered.

He now took off his boots, and with a piece of rope slung them to his back. Then he crept up the roof, and peered in at an open window.

"Humph!" he muttered, "ef they'd put that bed thar fur my accommodation, they couldn't 'a' stood it more convenient. All I've got to do, is to tap him like this hyar."

And reaching in with his bludgeon, he tapped the pillow where Bert Brainard's head was soon to lie.

"All right?" whispered Rankin, from below.

"All right!" responded Pillsbury.

Rankin crept off in the darkness. His benchman crouched down behind a chimney. Dead silence reigned.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DROP FALLS.

A FEW minutes after Jim Rankin left old man Falkner, the door which he had left half open behind him was pushed still further open, and Bert Brainard paused on the threshold.

"Ah, Mr. Falkner! Are you alone? Shall I be intruding?"

"Not at all! not at all, my dear boy! Come in, sir! come in! I was just thinking of you. We old fellows are more and more disposed to take it quietly, you know."

Bert entered and sat down in the seat Jim Rankin had vacated.

A pleasant, chatty conversation followed, until Bert said:

"I am more than pleased with the prospect here, and have about concluded to get some stock, if I can buy to advantage, and settle down among you. By the way, I heard last night that you might be wanting to dispose of some of your cattle. If that is so, I should like to talk the matter over with you, to-morrow."

"Eh! What's that? Why, I have just struck a bargain with Jim Rankin."

"Is it possible that he has stolen a march on me here?" cried Bert, with a look of disappointment. "Well, I don't know but he is more than even with me, after all!"

"If I had imagined such a thing, my dear boy, you may depend that I would have preferred you to him. I gave him a good bargain. But it is past recall. Here is the money for it, and by this time he has the cattle."

As he spoke, he put the money in a drawer of the table, and turned the key upon it.

Then, after some more expressions of regret on both sides, the conversation drifted to Bert's father, and old man Falkner told incidents of their college life.

By ten o'clock the dancing ceased and then followed a lively time in which the guests took their departure.

All of old man Falkner's herders went with Jim Rankin, to give him the "lift" he needed.

Left alone with father and daughter, Bert saw that the former had been putting in his time with the bottle in the interval since he had left him, an hour or so before.

The truth was that some of Rankin's crowd, under instructions from their master, had labored, with only too good success, to get the old man in his cups.

This was another humiliation for Lariat Lil, and embarrassed by her distress, Bert was glad when he had been shown to his room.

The window was wide open, and the head of the bed directly beside it. Thinking nothing of this, Bert was soon dreaming of the girl who in a few short hours had taken complete possession of his heart.

A most delightful vision was suddenly darkened by the apprehension of Jim Rankin creeping upon him for a treacherous blow, and he woke with a start, and half-raised on his elbow, to see the body of a man framed by his window and outlined against the sky. Then a crashing blow deprived him of consciousness, and he sunk back upon his pillow without so much as a groan.

It was still dark, so that no one could have seen the shadowy figure that stole down the roof of the lean-to a moment later.

As it reached the eaves, some one from the ground below whispered:

"You've fetched him?"

"You bet!" was the response.

"Then I reckon you're ready fur a hand to pack him down hyar."

"That's jest what I'm waitin' fur."

"Give us yer hand."

There was a slight sound of scrambling, and two stood on the roof.

They ascended to the window, entered, came forth again, bearing a heavy burden between them, bore it to the eaves, and lowered it to the ground, one of them descending first to receive it, to be followed by the other, and so carried it away from the house.

"You hain't got his nag yit?" queried Pillsbury.

"I will, though," answered Rankin, confidently.

"I'm glad it's you as has got to face them dogs."

"They know me. It's all right."

"What's the reason they ain't out an' goin' fur us now? I thought o' them after you left me."

"Waal, I made it my business to see that they was safe in the stable."

"I hope you may come away with a whole skin!"

"I kin look out fur Number One. While I'm

gone, you git him into his togs. We don't want to send him to glory in a night-gown! Did you ever see the like o' this?"

And the borderman sniffed contemptuously at Bert's importation of what he considered an effeminate custom from the States.

Pillsbury only laughed, as he addressed himself to the task of drawing on the garments which they had brought away with the sleeper.

Leaving his confederate, Rankin crept toward the stables.

As he drew near, he heard the dogs start up from their bed of hay, and come toward the door.

He spoke to them in a low tone before either barked, and a change in their movements and the sound of their panting breath showed that they recognized him.

He opened the door without apprehension, and soon had them capering about him, leaping up to lick his face.

They let him take Bert Brainard's horse from the stable, and only whined a little when he shut them up again.

"You've got him all O. K.?" was Pillsbury's greeting. "Waal, you air a corker!"

"I don't go off half-cocked, ye onderstand!" replied Rankin, complacently.

"But we'd better go off without much more monkeyin' about hyar. Sich luck don't run long."

"Hold on! I ain't done yit. Lay low tell I git back."

"Whar air you off to now?"

"I'm goin' to cover up our tracks. Do you reckon we could cart him off the like o' this, an' no questions asked?"

"Waal, I 'low as they'd be left to answer their own conundrums."

"Not much! Answer 'em yerself, an' then they'll be answered the way ye want 'em."

Without more explicit explanation, Rankin crept away.

Entering the house by means of a hatchet, which he used as a jimmy with a skill that would not have shamed a professional crackman, he went to the "best room," and there proceeded to rifle the table drawer of the money he had paid old man Falkner but an hour or two before.

He had but to insert the corner of the hatchet over the drawer, and pry up the top of the table, to clear the bolt of the lock, and so open the drawer without difficulty.

He had secured the money, and was about to take himself off, when he was startled by the sound of stumbling footsteps.

"Hang me ef it ain't the ole man!" he ejaculated, gazing about in dismay for some means of escape. "He'll drop on to me, an' then I'm good fur clearin' the country. The boys won't stand this hyar, no way ye kin fix it!"

It was a desperate moment. Theft was the one crime which he could not commit with impunity.

Nearer drew the steps, and he could see a light glinting through the crevice under the door.

"He's got a candle! He'll spot me, sure!"

The burglar was panting with terror. He had but a moment to decide his course, and his brain was in confusion.

Then came a surge of hatred. This man was going to destroy him.

"It'll be in self-defense!" he muttered. "It's him or me! I hate to do it. I hain't nothin' ag'in' him. He's always used me well. Besides, he's her father. But that won't let me out. I've got to git clear somehow!"

Scarcely realizing what he was doing, he had taken up his position behind the door, and was balancing the hatchet in his hand.

It is thus that murder creeps upon a man who has not quite expected to meet it in the way.

Suddenly, by a single thought, Jim Rankin was transformed into as ruthless and exultant a demon as ever lay in wait for a victim.

"It's right to my hand!" he almost shouted. "She'll believe that the ole man caught him, an' he knocked him in the head to git away! She'll never look at him after that. What a fool I've been, not to see it when the game was right to my hand!"

After that he braced himself without further scruple.

The door was opened, and old man Falkner shambled in, in his night-clothes, one hand still grasping the door-latch for support, while the other held the candle above his head, so shakily that it seemed as if he might drop it at any moment.

As he entered the room, looking toward the table in which he had left his money, a hand

reached out of the darkness behind him, delivering a quick blow on his head.

His knees gave way under him, and without seeing who had struck him, he sunk unconscious.

Wary of any noise that might waken Lariat Lil, Jim Rankin caught his victim as he was falling, so that only the candlestick fell with a clatter.

He put his foot upon it, and all was wrapped in darkness again.

Then, easing the old man to the floor, his assailant fled out into the night.

"Eh! What's up? The old man, or Lil?" asked Pillsbury, leaping into the saddle for instant flight, at sight of Rankin's agitation.

"Don't be a fool!" growled his principal. "Everything's lovely. Couldn't possibly be better. I've cooked this gent's goose fur him, an' that's one satisfaction. Git down out o' that, an' help me to pack him on his critter. Whar is he? What have you done with him?"

"Why, whar's your eyes? Don't you see he's already packed fur portage?"

"Waal, you air good fur somethin', an' that's a fact," admitted Jim, seeing that his henchman had been busy in his absence. "Sure he'll carry?"

"You bet he will."

Rankin satisfied himself by following with his fingers the ligatures that held the unconscious Bert on the back of his horse.

"Waal," he said, in conclusion, "git's the word!"

"Git it is!" assented Pillsbury, putting his horse in motion.

CHAPTER XII.

APPEARANCES.

LARIAT LIL went to bed with a strange tumult in heart and brain.

The cowboys had all admired her, and had found opportunity to let her know it, too, in spite of Jim Rankin's jealous vigilance.

But then, they admired, much in the same way, an unusually fleet or well-formed horse, or a fine rifle.

How different was the delicate deference with which Bert Brainard had seemed to set her apart from everything else in the world!

She had resented, as any spirited girl might, being lumped with the other desirable things of life; but now a feeling of shame at being half so nice as Bert seemed to think her, was blended with keen delight that he should think so, nevertheless.

It is not strange, then, that she found it not the easiest thing in the world to still the thoughts that chased one another in rioting confusion through her brain, and calm herself to sleep.

For some time she turned and twisted restlessly, and when she found how completely the stranger had taken possession of her imagination, she was overwhelmed with maiden shame.

Even in the darkness she blushed to think that her heart had so easily slipped from her keeping.

"When I have not known him twenty-four hours—oh! And he has seen ten thousand girls prettier and in every way a hundred times nicer than I, and has never given me a second thought!"

Burying her hot face in the pillow, she threw the coverlet over her head, determined to banish the tidy young tenderfoot from her thoughts, and go to sleep.

But, as is so often the case in life, this was easier resolved than carried out.

She fell to wondering what the girls were like in Bert's Eastern home. How did they dress, and above all, how did they behave?

Not one of them, she felt sure, had a reputation for throwing a lariat!

How she hated the name in which hitherto she had taken a certain pride.

Of course they had told him! Lariat Lil! He must think her a boy—a tomboy!

She cried a little with vexation, and was so ashamed of it all that she drew the bedclothes more closely down over her head.

Thus it happened that, though wide awake, she heard but indistinctly, and heeded not at all, the sounds made by the prowlers, in capturing Bert and his horse.

However, her father's room was next to hers, and her attention was attracted by his getting up and going down-stairs.

There was nothing in this to alarm her. He might be going for a drink of water.

Truth to tell, the old man didn't leave water altogether to laundry and navigation purposes!

The thought of her father called up another cause for em-barrassment.

What would Bert think of him?

She had learned during the evening that Bert did not drink. Could he be a temperance advocate, and did all temperance people despise those who were addicted to this vice?

But she recalled the tenderness with which that same father had explained to Bert her breezy life, so that it might not seem unfeminine to him, and she felt ashamed at having recalled any weakness of his as a cause for humiliation.

Drunk or sober, her father was the best man alive! She loved him and honored him, and if any one—"any one at all!" and that meant Bert!—was so blind as not to see and respect his sterling qualities, that was just the individual whom she would give not a second thought!

With a right royal glow of loyalty she listened to her father's uncertain footsteps down the stair.

She heard him fumble at the latch of the best-room door, and open it. She heard the candle fall from his hand to the floor, thinking only that his unsteady hand had knocked something from its place.

If the old man had fallen it would not have brought her out of bed at once. She would have waited to hear whether he got up before going to his aid. For she knew that he was sensitive about having her see him in his weakness.

A gentleman—so his code ran—might be carried off to bed mellow every night, but it must be kept from his women-folks.

Jim Rankin, as has been said, was cautious enough to catch the victim of his treacherous blow, and ease him to the floor without noise, and his retreat in his stocking-feet was not audible to Lil, who had only her nose out from under the covers to breathe.

For the rest, she was on the side of the house opposite to Bert's room and the stables, and so heard nothing of the departure of the kidnappers.

But, as time passed, she fell to wondering what her father could be doing in the best room at that time of night, and why he did not return to bed.

After a while it occurred to her that she had not heard a sound after the noise of something falling.

With a slight sense of wonder, but not yet with anxiety, she uncovered her head and listened.

The house was as still as a tomb.

That thought had occurred to her, when she heard something that sounded like a groan, and in a flash started upright in bed, to sit trembling and trying to persuade herself that she was the victim of foolish fears.

And now, while she strained her sense of hearing in vain, a vague recollection came to her of sounds that had passed unheeded.

She recalled that she had thought, in a fleeting way, that the dogs were moving about the premises. It now seemed to her that it had been more like the tread of a horse.

More than this, she felt certain that some one had been moving in the house before her father had got up.

She was not a timid girl. No one in that part of the country feared depredators in the house. Cattle might be stolen, but burglaries were unheard-of.

By an odd change of thought, though her mind had been so full of her father's guest, she now forgot all about him.

She heard another groan, this time of unmistakable distinctness, and thinking only that something had happened to her father, she leaped out of bed, and stopping but to throw on her dress over her night-clothes, ran down-stairs.

"Father! father!" she called, finding all in darkness.

A groan was the only response.

"Oh, papa! Where are you? What is the matter?"

She groped her way into the room, appealing to him to speak to her.

She stepped upon the candle with her bare foot, and just beyond stumbled against a recumbent body.

In terror and grief, shivering with the fear that he had fallen in some kind of a fit—no doubt caused by his intemperance—and was dying, she knelt and took him in her arms.

Only feeble, whining moans replied to her frantic appeal. She knew that he was unconscious.

Running out into the kitchen, sobbing and moaning as she went, she got matches, and returned, striking one as she entered the room where her father lay.

Her first glance took in a spectacle that froze her blood!

There lay the old man, writhing feebly, his face distorted with pain, and blood on the floor where his head rested!

The candle, near him, had been crushed out of shape by a foot heavier than hers. But there were others, left from the festivities of the evening, and she tremulously lighted one.

Then she went down on her knees again, to take him in her arms and drop her tears upon his face.

But she had to get water and work over him for some time, before she could revive him.

Then he opened his eyes and gazed at her in the surprise and bewilderment of one waking from a swoon.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Oh, you have fallen and hurt yourself!" she exclaimed, sobbing to think that he should have brought this upon himself in such a way.

He looked at the blood, then put his hand to his head, then gazed at the floor again.

There he saw the hatchet, and from that his eye wandered to the table, the drawer of which was open.

"See! see!" he cried, suddenly stretching out his hand. "The money—it's the money!"

"Money!" repeated Lil, in bewilderment.

"Look! The drawer! I have been robbed!"

He straightened up out of her arms, got upon his knees, and pointed wildly to the drawer.

In amazement the girl followed the direction of his outstretched finger, and went and stared into the empty drawer.

"There is nothing here," she said.

"It has been rifled! See! I was struck with this!"

He reached out and laid hold of the hatchet.

The girl stared at it and shuddered.

"Help! help!" he called feebly, sinking with weakness and dizziness.

But when she ran to him, he showed that he was not calling for personal assistance.

"After the robber!" he cried, clinching his fist. "The ingrate! the villain!"

Then the thought of Bert Brainard flashed back upon her mind.

He was the one who could and would espouse her father's cause. He would avenge this poor old man stricken down on his very hearthstone.

Burning with indignation, she ran out of the room and up the stairs, to pound upon the stranger's door, and call to him:

"Mr. Brainard, get up! Oh, some one has robbed my father, and tried to kill him! Get up! get up!"

From below stairs came a sort of roar of rage.

"Girl, what are you about? Come down hyer! Lil! Lil!"

But, not gathering the significance of these words, she stood in amazement that her agonized summons called forth no response from the room.

"Mr. Brainard!" she cried again, shaking the door violently.

A new burst of fury came from below, and dead silence reigned in the guest chamber.

With a sudden terrible fear the girl pressed her hand over her heart, and staggered against the wall.

"He has been killed!" she whispered, hoarsely. "He is dead! dead! dead!"

But her father was calling to her.

"Lil! have you gone mad? Do you expect that villain to play the thief and the sheriff too?"

"Thief!" she repeated, as if she did not clearly comprehend the word.

"Come down hyer!" called the old man. "Take horse and go for Jim Rankin! He'll have the rascal strung up before sunrise!"

"Thief!" reiterated the girl, her father's accusation forcing its way to her comprehension.

For a moment she stood perfectly still, and then with a sudden determination as if nothing in the world could stop her, she tore open the door, and gazed into the room her father's guest had occupied.

The moon was now up, and was streaming in through the window. The room was untenanted. The bed had been used, but was now empty.

As if unwilling to believe the evidence of her eyes, she walked into the room and passed her hand over the bed.

Then, suddenly, she crouched down upon the floor, and covered her face with her hands.

In the next moment was crowded more of anguish than she had believed it possible for any one to suffer in a lifetime.

She shed no tears, nor uttered a sound. She only crouched there, with a feeling that she was waiting for death.

But her father still called to her, and she went down to him, walking slowly, heavily.

"Well!" he said, querulously, "are you satisfied! He isn't there."

"No one is there," she admitted, speaking in dull, hard tones.

"The thief!" cried the old man. "And to think that I took him into my house, and that my daughter—"

"How do you know that it was he?" she interrupted, with sudden energy. "I don't believe it!"

"Eh? What?" fairly shouted the old man, beside himself with rage.

"Did you see him?" demanded the girl.

"See him? No—but I felt him! He struck me from behind that door, as I entered."

"Oh, it can't be! it can't be!" she cried, suddenly breaking down, and wringing her hands. "I will never believe it!—never! never!"

And she burst into wild sobs.

"Lil," cried her father, shocked out of his rage, "is it possible that you—that you—"

He could not say it, but she supplied the words that faltered on his lips.

"Yes!" she said, lifting her head with proud defiance, "I love him, with my whole heart and soul! Guilty or not guilty, I love him!"

"A thief! A murderer! Your own father's murderer!"

She shuddered.

"Rankin paid me for the cattle I sold him," went on the old man. "That scoundrel saw the money—saw me lock it in that drawer."

"Jim Rankin!" cried the girl, clinching her hand. "He again? He is my evil genius! How I hate the very sound of his name!"

As she spoke, she only thought of Rankin as putting the temptation in the way of the man she loved. She hated him for that.

But suddenly came another thought.

"Oh!" she cried, "it is more likely Rankin himself! Listen! He has come here for revenge, and, after doing something to Mr. Brainard, thought he might as well take his money back!"

"You are beside yourself!"

"I'll prove to you that he is somewhere about. His horse will be in the stable!"

With this new thought, she fairly ran out of the house.

As she entered the stable the dogs met her joyfully, but Bert's horse was gone.

On leaden feet she went back to the house.

"Well?" demanded her father.

She only crouched on the floor, dropping her face into her hands.

"Go for Rankin!" he insisted. "It will be nuts to him to string the rascal up! He'll never sleep until he has him."

"Never!" answered the girl. "Why are you so bitter against him? What is a little money to—"

"Money! money!" fumed the old man. "And is my broken head to go for nothing? It may be the death of me yet!"

She covered her face again, but did not stir.

Then came the sound of an approaching horseman, and that brought her to her feet wildly.

CHAPTER XIII.

FAST BOUND.

WHEN Jim Rankin had gained possession of his rival, his first emotion was savage, almost delirious exultation.

"Curse him! I've got him fixed, an' I've got her fixed!" he muttered to himself, as he spurred away from the scene of his treacherous assault.

"It was a blasted shame to have to salt the ole man, bein's as he never done me no harm. But he's sarved me a better turn to-night than he ever did before in his life, you bet! I hope I didn't crack him so's but what he'll come 'round ag'in; but in the heat o' savin' my own bacon, I may have gone fur him jest a leetle harder'n I lowed to. Ary way, I won't make no mistake about this hyar snoozer, bet yer sweet life!"

In a paroxysm of concentrated rage, he burst into a flood of profanity, and suddenly snatching his lariat from the pommel of his saddle, swung it about his head and brought it down across Bert's unconscious body with a vicious slash.

"Waal, I'll sw'ar!" ejaculated Pillsbury, staring in surprise. "What in Cain has gone with you, anyway?"

This check caused Jim to hang his lariat again in place, but produced no verbal reply save a string of growled oaths.

"Waal," said the other, dryly, "I reckon you don't want to let the boys see nothin' o' that

sort. They'll 'low as you have got it bad, an no mistake."

Jim suddenly became silent and thoughtful.

Without intending to, his companion had suggested caution to him.

"Look a-hyar, Bob," he said, presently. "What's the reason we want that gang fur to git their noses into this thing, anyway? We've got this hyar galoot, an' got him in a bag; an' you an' me kin cook his goose fur him as brown as ef the hull lot had their fingers in the pie!"

"Too many cooks spoils the broth," quoted Pillsbury, indifferently.

"That's what's the matter—especially this hyar kind o' broth, which the same it wants to be handled tenderly. Then ag'in, thar won't be so many fur to give the thing away; an' thar ain't nothin' bad about that."

"Ef they don't see nothin', they can't tell nothin'."

"That's my idee. S'pose you ride ahead, an' tell 'em as the thing's off, but they'll git their money all the same. Say as they're to go on after the rest o' the fellers, but you wait fur me."

Without reply, Pillsbury rode rapidly forward.

Some time after, Rankin came up with him, riding slowly along alone.

By this time the moon was above the horizon, and its silvery light showed that the two were following a trail made by several horsemen.

Before long they branched off, and after two or three hours' ride toward the west, reached a spot where the table-land was cleft by a deep gully, almost as if the earth had been cracked by a tremendous earthquake, though it had really been worn by a rill that drained the basin in which they were riding.

Though the ground was here rocky, it supported a comparatively dense growth of pine trees, so that the way was thrown in shadow.

"Hyar's whar we want to pull up," said Rankin, swinging from the saddle, and tying his horse to a sapling. "I don't reckon the thing'll be looked into very close, but it's jest as well to be on the safe side, an' it won't do us no good to have our hoss-tracks lead right up to the spot whar we git our work in."

Then going up to his captive, he went on:

"You must 'a' hit him a purty tolerable bad lick. We hain't had a mew out o'—"

He broke off abruptly.

"Waal, I'll sw'ar as you're a middlin' sharp one, anyway!" he ejaculated.

"What's the row?" demanded Pillsbury, coming up. "I fixed him so's he wouldn't make no noise. I 'lowed that was what you wanted."

"You be blowed!" responded Rankin. "What do ye make o' this hyar?"

To his utter amazement, Pillsbury now saw the captive rise erect in his saddle, though all the way hither he had lain as he had been bound, with his face upon his horse's neck.

"Been playin' 'possum!" exclaimed Rankin. "A little further, an' he'd 'a' had his feet out o' that, like he's got his hands. But I reckon that's love's labor lost."

"Waal, pardner, how do ye think ye feel?"

This last was addressed to Bert, and was followed by an exultant chuckle.

"What do you propose to do with me?" asked Bert, quietly.

"Waal, that depends," answered Rankin. "I hain't brung you out hyar fur no coddlin', bet yer sweet life!"

"I presume not," said Bert, outwardly, at least, undisturbed. "However, the sooner you state what your real purpose is, the sooner we will have this business over with."

"Oh, don't you git in a sweat!" laughed Rankin. "You'll be out o' your misery soon enough!"

He then changed his tone, and went on:

"Now, look a-hyar, pardner, business is business—you know that. We've got you, an' we've got you bad."

"Well, what of it?"

"This of it. A crack or two more or less on your topknot won't make no kind o' difference to us—"

"Unless as a gratification to you. But suppose you do the thing in a little less cowardly way. Give me a show, as you say out here—"

"Nary show!" interrupted Rankin. "You've had all the show you're goin' to have in this hyar section; an' too much show it has been, too."

"But I am not equally good at everything," urged Bert, coolly. "You ought to be willing to meet me on your own ground. I fancy that a brace of revolvers, at any reasonable distance, will simplify matters between you and me."

"How you do run on!" sneered Rankin. "You must 'a' been layin' that thing out in yer mind along back."

"I did think that it might possibly come to something of the sort," admitted Bert, "if you were not as cowardly as tyrannical."

Rankin quivered with rage, but held himself in.

"That's the best you've got, so it's all right fur you to try it on; but you can't spur me out o' the gait I'm bound to travel," he said, doggedly.

It was true that Bert had been playing his best card. His one hope was to secure the chances of a duel, knowing that his enemy had not been to the trouble and risk of kidnapping him without some desperate purpose.

If, by playing upon the local sentiment of manly fairness, and by the imputation of cowardice, he could get at least a chance to defend himself, he believed that, if he once more proved more than a match for his rival, he could easily come to an understanding with Pillsbury, who had nothing personal against him.

"I don't expect much of you," he pursued, with a coolness that added to the stinging contempt in his tones. "When I had beaten you fairly, and not half so much as I could easily have done, at running, you tried to sneak out of it by a pretended fall—by which, however, no one was deceived. As for your treacherous assault upon me after I had downed you without half trying, the less said— But, then, there is one excuse, and I am willing to give you the benefit of anything that will mitigate such an act. It was done in the heat of passion."

"But the present situation is different. Don't you suppose that every one will know why I am made away with? And who will believe that it was done fairly? It isn't likely that I would come to such a place as this alone to meet you."

"Now, what I propose is, that you throw off on this. Let me go back to the ranch, and I give you the word of a gentleman that no one shall ever know of this from me. Then I will meet you in the morning, with any weapon you please, and with Nate Crosier as my second."

"Hum! You've got it fixed mighty fine! Waal, you've wasted yer time. The question is, will you set quiet while I tie your arms, or would you rather I'd knock you on the head, and tie you afterward?"

Bert saw that nothing could be done with this fellow, who lacked even the sentiments of honor that prevail among the rudest men.

"I think you quite equal to it," he answered, quietly putting his arms behind him, to be bound without futile resistance.

Whatever was about to be done to him, the possession of his senses was his one chance to elude it.

Drawing his elbows so far back as to cause him not a little pain, Rankin bound them with the end of his lariat, taking more time to it than Bert then understood the reason of, though he was soon to learn.

Then freeing his feet, which had been secured beneath his horse's belly, his captor commanded him to dismount.

But first he warned him:

"None o' your shananigan, ye onderstand! I'd ruther not bore you, ef you don't coax me to it; but ef you do, it won't set heavy on my stomach fur to save myself all further bother with ye."

Bert threw his leg over his horse's neck, and slid to the ground, without reply.

On his feet, he felt a return of confidence which caused an involuntary straightening up of his figure, but he did not lose sight of the fact that he was unarmed, while his captors were able, and only too ready, to put an end to his chances in the shortest way.

Rankin took Bert's handkerchief from his pocket, and proceeded to fold it, as if to blind his eyes, when he suddenly paused.

"I'll give you one show, though," he said, as if the idea had just occurred to him. "What do you say to clearin' out o' this country an' never comin' back!"

"Hold on!" he proceeded, intercepting Bert's reply. "You want to know jest what you're bargainin' fur before you close 'er. You're to make a bee-line from this hyar spot due east, an' never wind your yawp to nobody about this thing this side o' the Mississippi."

CHAPTER XIV.

JIM RANKIN'S REVENGE.

"I SHOULD say that that was a bad bargain," answered Bert, coolly.

"Eh! you don't ketch on?"

"No."

"Have you any idee what's on t'other side o' the bargain, my Christian friend?" asked Rankin, with a portentous deliberation.

"It doesn't make any difference what is on the other side," replied Bert, steadily.

"I reckon you hain't took my measure yit," ventured Rankin, doubtfully.

"Oh, yes, I have."

"I ain't no chicken."

"Far from it! I take you to be a coyote—a wolf that is bold enough when there is no danger to himself."

"Do you understand that I kin fix you fur all you're worth, an' nobody in this hyar wide world—only Bob Pillsbury, hyar, an' he belongs to me—will ever drop to me? You pass out, an' I takes the pot!"

There could be no doubt that Jim Rankin alluded to Lariat Lil as the stake for which they were playing, and that he meant to have her when he had disposed of his rival.

He predicted his triumph with the savage ferocity of an exultant fiend. How his eyes blazed! How his teeth gleamed beneath his quivering lip!

"Aren't you counting your chickens before they are hatched?" asked Bert. "I give you credit for intelligence enough to see that you will gain nothing by my death. You will be as far from the mark as ever."

"Don't you be quite so previous!" retorted Rankin.

Drawing from his pocket the wallet he had taken from the table drawer at old man Falkner's, he slapped it on his palm, and asked:

"Now, what do you reckon this hyar thing is?"

Bert did not recognize the wallet, having seen it but once.

"Is it possible," he exclaimed, "that you can hope to bribe me with money? Would you take such a bribe, if you were in my place? Don't be a fool! Put up your money!"

"Waal," said Rankin, "I didn't take you that way, an' that's a fact. But thar's more than one use fur money, as you'll find out. This hyar money happens to belong to ole man Falkner. I low you don't disremember seein' him lock it in his table drawer three or four hours ago."

"You have robbed him!" ejaculated Bert, now recognizing the wallet.

"Me!" cried Rankin. "Not much! You robbed him."

"And do you hope," exclaimed Bert, his voice quivering with indignation, "to make any one believe that I have been guilty of robbery, and that you have apprehended me? You must be far gone in folly."

"Not so fast," cautioned Rankin. "Suppose to-morrer mornin' they find old man Falkner dead in his—"

"You have killed him."

Bert's first thought was of Lariat Lil's grief at the loss of her father, who was her all.

"Dead in his best room," pursued Rankin, not heeding the interruption, "an' a young man of your size a-missin'? Suppose I lets on as how I paid the ole man a bit o' money what ain't picked up every day by the fu'st tenderfoot what comes along, an' thar's the draw pried open with a hatchet, but no money—"

"You devil!" burst forth Bert, as the plot began to develop itself.

"Suppose," persisted Rankin, still undisturbed, "they find a gent o' your make-up dead, with this hyar wallet on him, an' the look o' havin' been killed by accident while he was makin' off with the plunder? You must be a fool, to low as I'd have anythin' to do with ketchin' you. I'll fix you better'n that."

Bert stood aghast. He thought of Lariat Lil gazing upon his dead body and believing that he had killed and robbed her father.

Was ever plot of more fiendish malignity? A thief!

For a moment he wavered, his head spinning round.

Would it not be better to go away and give her up?

But at this his heart cried out with a passionate intensity of protest that revealed a love even stronger than he had realized.

He had known her but a day, yet it was rending his heart-strings to lose her.

Then, suppose Rankin was only deceiving him?

Bad as he had proved himself, was it possible that, having killed the old man, he would persist in his plot with the coolness he was now manifesting?

And here was Pillsbury, who had not seemed a particularly bad fellow, too calm—so Bert thought—for the accomplice of a murderer.

If it was a deception, the chance of Rankin having the hardihood to carry his purpose to the extreme was not equal to the certainty of losing Lil by abandoning her.

If, on the other hand, the old man was really dead, then it was not likely that the confessed murderer would let his enemy escape, to betray him. So there was nothing to gain by yielding.

While working out the situation to this dilemma, which was done almost in a flash, Bert had not betrayed the agitation that really convulsed him.

He replied, coolly and firmly:—

"I will not go!"

"You won't?"

"No!"

"Waal," said Rankin, "I was only tryin' your grit. I never meant to let you git out o' my clutches alive."

"I supposed not," answered Bert, quietly.

Without more ado Rankin now bound his prisoner's eyes with his own handkerchief.

This too he fixed with a great deal of care—more than Bert thought the occasion required.

Then came a blindfold walk over rough ground, the reason for which Bert mistook. He thought that he was being taken to some secret place, the road to which was to be hidden from him.

Such a precaution as this, he argued, would be taken only with a view to his continuing alive to betray it at some time in the future.

He began to think that Jim Rankin was dealing largely in buncomb.

Presently his captor, who had thus far walked at his side, holding him by the arm, stopped him.

He did something—what, Bert could not tell—to the handkerchief; but there could be no doubt about his opening Bert's coat, stuffing the wallet into an inner pocket, and buttoning it up again. Bert could feel the wallet pressing against his breast.

Then Rankin said:

"Step about a foot high, and a little to the right."

Bert did as directed, and set his foot on a log.

"Forward march!" commanded Rankin.

But Bert drew back with a shudder. For the first time his enemy had drawn from him a sign of emotion.

But there was cause to make any man's blood run cold. He knew that in this wild country chasms were spanned by tree-trunks felled so as to fall across them.

"I cannot cross such a place as this, blindfold and with my arms tied," he protested.

"So much the worse for you," answered his persecutor, carelessly. "You've got to go, anyway."

"To my death? Do you mean to murder me?"

"Death be blowed! Git along!"

"I shall certainly fall."

"Waal, it won't hurt you much, I reckon, ef you do. But ef you don't want to sp'ile that thar girl's complexion o' yourn, by barkin' them lily-white cheeks, you walk 'er straight, you do—an, that's a friend's advice."

Still Bert hesitated. It was a great deal to take on the faith of such a man as Jim Rankin. It might be, as he intimated, at most only a tumble into a bramble bush; but then it *might* be a sheer fall of a thousand feet!

Bert was persuaded of the former possibility by the interposition of Pillsbury, who broke in, with a tone of impatience as if they were delaying over a trifle:

"Come! come! Don't keep us a-waitin' hyar all night!"

"I'll stiddy you with this stick," said Rankin, placing the point of a stick between Bert's shoulder blades.

Without more objection Bert commanded his nerves, and set out to walk the log without seeing where to step.

He had taken half a dozen steps with a firmness which showed wonderful self-command, when Rankin, who was following, said:

"Good-by, my Christian friend! Ef you know anythin' whar you're goin' to, it'll be a purty considerable spell, I reckon, before you furgit Jim Rankin's revenge!"

As he ceased speaking, he gave Bert a sudden push with the stick with which he had promised to steady him, and at the same instant the handkerchief that bound his eyes and the lariat that confined his arms, having been tied with a slip knot, were flung off.

He was entirely free, but had been thrown from his balance, and what he saw in that first flash of sight turned his blood to ice.

The moon, looking down from the zenith, flooded with her silvery light a canyon with

precipitous sides, not more than twenty feet across, but full three hundred feet deep. At its bottom, a rill, fretted to foam by the jagged rocks that obstructed its course, gleamed like a silver ribbon.

Pushed clear of the log that spanned this fearful chasm, Bert realized that he was plunging headforemost down to death and mutilation, and then, while his head swam with a sickening giddiness, confusing all thought save the feeling that this was the last of earth, the canyon seemed to burst into fiendish echo with the shrieks of a thousand horrified spirits of the place!

Truly Jim Rankin was revenged!

CHAPTER XV.

A LOYAL PARD.

THE horseman who had startled Lariat Lil did not prove to be, as her wildly-beating heart at first prompted her to suppose, her father's guest returning.

It was Nate Crosier who, seeing by the light that some one was yet stirring, leaped from his horse and entered the house without the ceremony of knocking.

"Eh! What in Cain!" he ejaculated, seeing the old man risen to his knees, the blood streaming down his cheek to the floor, while Lil stood aghast.

"Oh, Nate!" she cried, starting forward and seizing him by both hands.

"He's been at it, has he? I knowed it!" declared honest Nate, with a groan.

"At it!" repeated old man Falkner. "The hypocrite! the thief! the murderer! Nate, you're the man I want to see. Don't spare horseflesh, but spur after Jim Rankin at your best, and—"

"I'll have the soul out of his body before he's an hour older!" shouted Nate, furiously.

"Whar is my pard? What has he done to him?"

"Your pard? Don't call that lying scoundrel a pard of yours! Only catch him for me, and string him up before my door, where I can see him from the window. Get Jim Rankin. It's the job he's looking for."

"What's gone with you, ole man?" cried honest Nate, sorely bewildered.

"Why, can't you see? The rascal has robbed me, and attempted my murder! And that ain't the worst of it! Curse him, I say!"

Old man Falkner mingled a groan of despair with a burst of rage. He was thinking of the havoc the tidy young tenderfoot had made in his daughter's heart. That was beyond all considerations of money, or even his own personal injury. He could not look at her white face without feeling that no requital exacted of Bert Brainard could repay a single throe of anguish in her gentle bosom.

"An' has he got away with my pard, too?" asked Nate, still clinging to his idea. "Whar is he, Lil? You straighten out this muddle, ef you kin. What's the ole man gittin' through him?"

But Lariat Lil was speechless. She could not bring herself to accuse the man she loved. She only covered her face with her hands.

"Are your wits wool-gathering, you obstinate donkey!" shouted old man Falkner, in a rage. "Can't you be got to see that it is your pard, as you call him, who has robbed me and absconded?"

"My pard? Bert Brainard?"

"Your pard? Bert Brainard?" mimicked the old man, furiously. "Hang me if I don't believe you are in league with him!"

But this was not true. He knew honest Nate better.

He then told in detail how Jim Rankin had paid him for some cattle, how Bert had seen the money placed in the table-drawer, and finally how he (old man Falkner) had caught the robber in the act, to be struck down in his own house by a murderous blow with a hatchet.

"An' you seen him?" cried Nate, as if yielding only to this incontestable proof of his partner's guilt.

"Saw him? No! He struck me down with a blow from behind—the coward!"

"He never done it!" declared Nate, positively, starting proudly erect with loyal confidence.

"What!" exclaimed the old man.

"It was somebody else—Jim Rankin himself, I'll bet all I'm worth!" cried Nate.

"Nonsense! The knave has fled the house; he is not in his room; his horse is not in the stable. Lillie, tell him."

"Eh? What? His hoss gone?" cried Nate, exultantly. "That settles it! What was these beauties doin', do you 'low, when he took that thar hoss out o' the stable? Nobody but Jim Rankin could do that."

And Nate patted the dogs that, having followed him into the house, now stood looking from one to the other of the excited human beings, to discover what it was that so moved them.

"Oh, Nate!" here burst in Lariat Lil, once more seizing his hands. "And I—I—"

But she could not proceed. She could not admit that her faith had wavered. But from that moment, for the rest of her life, she believed that Nate Crosier was the noblest fellow, and the most loyal friend, that God ever made!

"Come!" she cried, fairly dragging him toward the door. "We must find him! We will save him, and prove—"

"Hold on!" cried Nate, seeing her bare foot protrude from beneath her dress. "You can't go in that fix. Go to your room and dress yourself, while I git your boss ready."

Without stopping for words she ran off, while Nate hastened to the stable.

Left to himself, old man Falkner got into a chair, not without difficulty, and reflected on what had passed.

Flying down-stairs after the most hurried toilet of her life, Lariat Lil found him there, pale with excitement and loss of blood, and rushed to him, flinging her arms about him in an agony of remorse.

"Oh, papa! My own, darling papa!" she cried.

He knew what had suddenly shot to her heart. But what if she had forgotten him in that terrible struggle between her love and the doubt that assailed it?

"Go! go!" he said, with a generosity which showed whence she had inherited some of her best traits. "Don't mind me. I shall get on well enough. This little blow isn't as bad as it looks. If I have wronged him—"

But a grateful kiss stopped his lips.

Then into the saddle and away!

How they rode!

But even that breathless pace did not prevent Nate from explaining how he had happened to return to the ranch at that opportune moment.

He had been haunted by doubts of Jim Rankin, and when he learned that all of old man Falkner's cowboys were away, and Rankin not with his crowd, he could not prevail upon himself to let the night pass without assurance that all was right.

And now, if Jim Rankin was at the bottom of this, there was but one way in which he could take his prisoner to join his crowd without passing through Metropolisville, and Nate staked everything on this chance.

He could make no use of the dogs, having nothing with which to set them on the trail of Bert's horse, besides that they would betray his presence to Rankin, if he found him. He could not hope to succeed against the desperate villain openly.

He was fortunate enough to strike the trail made by Rankin, following those whom he had selected to assist in his scheme, and then dispensed with as adding to his risk without advantage.

But what was to be done when they came to the point where Rankin and Pillsbury had branched off from the trail with their prisoner?

"I will take one trail, and you the other," proposed Lil, promptly. "It will give us two chances to save him, instead of one. And if we fail, we can at least fix the crime on Jim Rankin, and then rouse the whole community to revenge. He shall not escape, if he does this wicked thing!"

The stern resolve in her tones was veined with a quiver of dread. What was revenge, after all, if he was robbed of life?

"Thar's five in this gang, an' only three in that," said Nate coming to a prompt decision. "I will give you what show thar is—an' that's little enough. Take care of yourself. Jim Rankin is a tougher one than you think. Don't you jump into his clutches, 'lowin' as he won't have the heart to hurt you. He's like a p'ison rat. Ef you corner him, he'll show up the dirtiest white man you ever see!"

"I will take care of myself. Only—Nate!—don't let them hurt him if you can help it!"

She reached out and clutched his arm, and gave him a look of appeal that Nate Crosier never forgot.

When she had sped away without giving him a chance to answer her, he said to himself:

"Ef Bullindy Bowers ketches on to yer humble sarvant anythin' like that— But, thar! it won't do to talk about!"

But he had not ridden far along the trail he had selected for himself, when a new thought took possession of him.

What had he done? He had sent a weak girl

to cope with the most desperate man in that section!

Suppose she found him? Would she stop to think of her own safety when she saw her lover in peril of his life?

Nate Crosier knew what she would do. She would not stop until she had reached his side!

And what might be expected of Jim Rankin?—a man who, if Nate's suspicions were correct, had kidnapped her lover, and had not stopped at a murderous assault on her father!

All at a rush Nate Crosier was overpowered with the conviction that Rankin would cap the climax by seizing upon the girl herself!

Instantly he pulled up his horse, and after a moment's pause with his heart in his mouth, he wheeled and spurred back to overtake the girl, at a speed that showed how terrible was his fear.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CAST FOR LIFE!

LARIAT LIL had no difficulty in following the trail by the light of the moon, till she came to a belt of timber which marked the border of the prairie land she had thus far been traversing.

Here, besides that the ground was often thrown in shadow, the way became rocky, so that the trail, clearly defined in the prairie grass, was now almost indistinguishable.

Her heart was sinking with a dread lest, even if she did not lose the clew altogether, she should be delayed till it would be too late, when she was startled by hearing the scream of a horse.

She knew enough of the habits of these animals to judge by the intonation of anger that the one which made the outcry had been bitten by another.

This would not have happened unless they had been left standing, and had got to snapping at each other, as irritable horses are apt to do.

Instantly she drew rein, and listened, till a second shrill cry satisfied her that her first supposition was correct.

But if those she was following had stopped, why had they done so? Was it possible that they had discovered that she was in pursuit of them? Were they now lying in ambush, to seize her as she came up?

With her blood running cold—for now she began to think what Jim Rankin might do, driven to desperation—she slipped from her saddle, and listened intently.

The quarreling of the horses showed her that they were still standing, and cautiously leading hers away from the trail to the right, so as not to be liable to discovery if her enemies came back on their track, she set out to reconnoiter.

And now she did a thing which was entirely owing to habit—a habit of which she had been ashamed less than twenty-four hours ago, but which she was destined to look back upon with glad pride for all the rest of her life.

She had handled a lariat until it had become second nature to her to turn it to all sorts of uses, and to depend upon it in any and every emergency; and now, without thinking of any special way in which it might serve her, she took it from her saddle-bow mechanically, as one familiar with the use of a revolver might draw it unconsciously.

Keeping well to the right of where she judged the trail to run, as indicated by the position of the horses, so as to reduce as much as possible the risk of running into an ambush, she crept stealthily forward, until she was directly opposite her guides.

She discovered that the horses were alone, and at the same time made out the sounds of human footsteps at some little distance further on, receding from her.

She also discovered that she was on one side of a gully too wide for her to leap, while those she was spying upon were on the other.

There was no time to go back. If this was Jim Rankin and his victim, the fact of dismounting was portentous. Whatever was to be done would be done in the next minute or two.

A glance down the precipitous sides of the gully suggested a possibility that made her blood run cold, and she hastened on with a prayer trembling on her lips.

The delay in which Jim Rankin tied a string to the corner of the handkerchief which bound Bert's eyes, so that he could jerk it off at the same time that he freed his victim's arms, so that, when found mangled on the rocks below, there should be nothing to indicate that he had not fallen from the bridge by accident while trying to cross it in the darkness—this delay gave Lariat Lil time to reach the transverse canyon at the moment that Bert set his foot on the fatal log.

As she saw what was about to happen, there was a moment of paralyzing terror, in which all the fearful possibilities of the situation flashed before her mind.

She was within thirty feet of the would-be murderers and their victim, but cut off from their position by an impassable gulch, not less than fifty feet deep, from the mouth of which, during rain, a cascade fell into the deeper canyon.

She might have shot Jim Rankin from where she stood, unperceived by the murderers, so intent were they in their evil work; but it would be too late.

Her lover was already balancing blindfold on the log, and a shot or any interruption would now disconcert him, and cause him to fall.

Two chances only presented themselves to her swimming brain.

It was possible—oh, it was surely possible!—that Rankin did not meditate his destruction in that awful way!

But this she knew was only a delusive hope conjured up by her agony.

One more chance—only one!—and that such as perhaps would have occurred to no one but her—one chance, which might be availed of only if seconded by a miracle, remained!

A tall pine, riven by the lightnings, had fallen so that she had had to step over its trunk to gain her present position.

In its fall a branch had broken off, so that its stump, not more than a foot long, and as large round as her arm, stuck out at right angles.

On the hither end of her lariat was a running noose by which it was ordinarily secured to the horn of her saddle.

With a celerity which came of a habit of quick movements, she slipped the noose over this natural peg, and swung the coil of the lariat round and round her head, partially hidden as she was from the murderers by a boulder which rose at the angle made by the gulch and the canyon, like a light-house at the end of a headland.

She was just in time. Jim Rankin had voiced his last gibe. Her lover was already toppling over the abyss!

It was her scream that Bert heard, as, calculating his fall with a practiced eye, she hurled her lariat.

Then, to attract his attention, so that he might make good any error in a cast which might have been distracted by the fearful stake, she shrieked his name:

"Bertie! Bertie! Bertie!"

He threw back his head just far enough to see the coming noose, and to realize that he was plunging head-foremost down through it.

As a drowning man clutches at a straw, he strove to seize it, too blindly for any sort of calculation.

Luckily it had been cast with an accuracy born of practice so prolonged that every movement had become mechanical, and nothing was left for him to do.

His head and both arms passed through the bight, but it struck him first on the right hip, and when he was snubbed up with a force that made the lariat twang like a bow-string, it tightened about his waist so that he felt as if he was being cut in two, as he swung head-downward across the gulch from the other side of which it had been cast.

Luckily for him, the point of rock on which his rescuer stood jutted out over the abyss, so that he swung clear. Otherwise he would have been dashed against the face of the cliff with a force that would have left little choice between that and the rocks below.

But he was safe—oh, he was safe!

How the girl's heart swelled as she realized this, and the fact that she—she who loved him so—had given him the priceless boon of life!

But it was not yet time for unchecked exultation. After a moment of staring wonder, Jim Rankin had thrown his hand back toward his hip, with a savage howl of profanity.

He did not draw the weapon, however.

"Take care, Jim Rankin!" cried a voice so incisive that it pierced his consciousness like a dart. "You know that I know how to shoot!"

He looked, and saw her, with a revolver trained upon him.

What he might have said to her would probably be no ornament to these pages, so it is little loss that he was cut short by a challenge from behind.

"Jim, I've got you, an' it's a carbine!"

It was Nate Crosier's voice. He had come up just in time so that, after being electrified by Lariat Lil's scream, he had taken three of the most gigantic strides of his life, and come within sight of the enemy.

As Bert swung back, like a pendulum, across the mouth of the gully, Nate saw him, and knew that he was so far safe. He knew, too, that the only remaining danger was that his would-be murderer would shoot him as he swung backward and forward, helpless.

"It's Daisy, Jim," he went on, "an' you know she's leetle ole lightnin' fur the hole she bores. I kin let daylight through you before you kin draw that, an' you know it! I reckon I'd orter do it anyway. Maybe I would, only fur Pillsbury, thar. It 'ud be a shame to throw off on him. But, make no mistake, Bob! I'd about as leave salt you as Jim, ef you drive me to it."

"Hands up, gents all!"

This last was said with such ringing determination that both the men complied with the command.

"Now you two walk straight across that thar bridge," ordered Nate, "an' don't you furgit that I kin put a bullet through both your bodies at once, ef you happen to be in line. When you git acrost, you keep on a-goin', you do; an' the fu'st man what balks, goes down. March!"

Both Jim Rankin and Bob Pillsbury knew that they were being let off cheap. There was not the shadow of a show for them in the way of fight, for Nate was hidden by the shadows, and could put at least one of them out of the fight before they could turn round.

In such a situation oaths were worse than useless; so the two marched off without uttering a syllable.

In their hearts both swore never to sleep or eat till Nate Crosier was under the sod; but then, execrated men frequently die of old age.

The ground on the other side of the canyon afforded no covert within pistol range, so that Nate could hold the murderers under his carbine till they were at a safe distance.

Meanwhile, Lariat Lil, fearing that the sawing of the lariat on the verge of the cliff, as Bert swung to and fro, would cut it in two, had hastily plucked off the jacket she wore, and inserted it between the rock and the strands that held her lover's life.

What was her delight, and Nate Crosier's, too, to hear a cheery call from below!

"All right, you brave girl!—and you, too, pard! Keep that villain at bay a minute and I'll be with you!"

And there was Bert coming up hand over hand!

He was better than his word. In less than the stipulated minute he had Lariat Lil in his arms.

"My darling!" he was breathing into her ear. "I don't need to ask if you love me. Otherwise you could never have called to me as you did a minute ago. Come! come! is it necessary to know one a century to find out that they have all of delight in their keeping? I found that out in the twinkling of an eye. You ought to know it by this time!"

"I do! I do!" she replied, clasping him ecstatically about the neck, and yielding her lips to his eager kisses.

Then, as she was very faint and tremulous, after the fearful ordeal through which she had passed, Bert found it necessary to keep his arm about her, and half-carry her, all the way back to where she had left her horse, and he seemed to take it away reluctantly even after he had lifted her into the saddle!

But then, there was Nate Crosier, who demanded and gave in return a perfect bear's hug of happy congratulation.

When they got back to the ranch, taking Jim Rankin's and Bob Pillsbury's horses with them, so that there would be nothing further to be apprehended from those precious gentlemen for at least the rest of that night, old man Falkner declared that he was so happy that he felt like thanking Jim Rankin for the little tap on the head he had favored him with.

But Jim was wise enough not to give opportunity for any kind of acknowledgments, and for some time to come no one but a trusted agent knew what had become of him.

And that famous lariat? It is an heirloom in the Brainard household, and no end of little B's claim the privilege of practicing with it—only on their birthdays, however, when Uncle Crosier and Aunt Belinda come over, and they listen breathlessly to the story that never grows old—Nate's thrilling account of that Cast for Life!

THE END.

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